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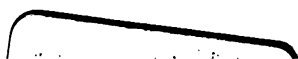
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ALONE IN THE WORLD.

A NOVEL.

BY

MRS. GORDON SMYTHIES,

AUTHOR OF

"COUSIN GEOFFREY," "MARRIED FOR LOVE,"
"THE DAILY GOVERNESS," &c.

"Why should we shrink and fear to live alone,
Since all alone, so Heaven has willed, we die?
Nor even the tenderest heart, and next our own,
Knows half the reasons why we smile or sigh."
THE CHRISTIAN YEAR.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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ALONE IN THE WORLD.

INTRODUCTION.

“ALONE in the world!” To whom do not these words apply? Who, however surrounded by friends, and by all the amenities and luxuries of life—who has not again and again, felt with our great Christian poet, that

“Each in its narrow cell,
Our hermit spirits roam and dwell apart?”

Who has not often, in the bitterness of disappointment in expected sympathy, or anticipated appreciation, smote upon his breast and said—“I am alone in the world.”

Each separate member of the great family

of the passions is indeed a lone giant, brooding in solitary gloom, generally amid the ruins of a broken heart. What so lonely as Love, Jealousy, Hate, Envy, Revenge, Despair, Remorse! nor less so the nobler mind, gentler laughs of the Faith, Sorrow, Charity, Pity, Hope, Regret, and Resignation, all brood and muse apart!

All deep feelings and all earnest characters are lonely. The follies, the vanities, and the frivolities of life may love a crowd, and the vain and giddy of all ages, ranks, and classes crowd together; but there is no thoughtful person who has not often felt, whatever his surroundings,

Lone as a solitary cloud,

Lone as the corpse within the shroud.

And if even, the well born and the wealthy, when they have heads to think and hearts to feel, are all conscious of this loneliness, how must it be with all those placed by fortune in isolated positions:—foundlings who have never

known a parent's pride, a parent's love ; orphans who are born to be ALONE IN THE WORLD?

The tutor, the governess, the companion, the protégée, all these are doubly, trebly alone.

Apart from the family and its tender ties, and apart from the coarser links that bind the servants in one common interest, theirs is indeed an isolated existence. We are all more or less alone in the world ; but oh, how lone are those, to whom father, mother, brother, and sister are forbidden words !

Happy for them if, as in the case of the heroine of the following story, early piety supplies the place of earthly ties, and the presence of the Heavenly Father is a living reality to the solitary child of earth. To such, touching as their orphan isolation may seem to our worldly vision, it is surely a great privilege to be alone in the world, to feel that their Father is the father of the fatherless—their Friend the friend of the friendless.

CHAPTER I.

Oh, there are partings such as press
The life from out young hearts, for who can guess
If ever more shall meet those mutual eyes ?

CHILDE HAROLD.

THE moon rose round and clear behind the dark, venerable towers of Westminster Abbey. How very old they looked in comparison with the fair young face of the "Lady Moon," as she held her court of stars in the clear obscure of a frosty sky !

It is not fair to tell a lady's age, and therefore we will only hint, as a warning against the general proneness to judge by appearances, that, all bright and young as she looks, the

moon is in reality nearly four thousand years older than that time-worn abbey itself. Yes, even if we give it into the bargain the years when it was first a temple to Apollo, and then a church dedicated to St. Peter, in the good old days of Saxon Ethelred.

According to her baptismal register, kept in the great archives of Creation, the moon was well "up in years,"—in short, of a certain age—when that strange jumble of lordly palaces and squalid hovels, haunts of grandeur and homes of misery, which we call WESTMINSTER, was a muddy, reedy swamp.

Let anyone presume to judge of a lady's age by her looks after this!

On the evening upon which our tale opens it wanted just four days of our great Christian festival—the Birthday of the Prince of Peace—CHRISTMAS-DAY.

Six o'clock had just tolled. There was not much light left, save from the moon above and the lamps beneath. The sun had set the

example of "early closing" by shutting up, and going off to "sup with Thetis" at four o'clock.

That extremes meet is proverbial, and nowhere do they meet more strangely than at Westminster, where all that is sublime and grand in architecture and in purport actually touches the most squalid, crazy haunts of the poorest and most abandoned of those whom Reformers heartlessly call "The perishing Classes—English Kaffirs and City Arabs."

What a contrast between the broad, silvery lights and ebon shadows on one side of the massive Abbey, and the Broadway, with its street night-market, lighted by flaring torches and candle-lamps, and crowded by the ragged, the starving, the drunken, the half-naked, and the lost! and that flaring Broadway itself, flanked by dark back-streets, blind alleys, and tumble-down courts, where hunger, want, and disease are visited by all the vices, and too often, alas! by them alone!

We have said it had just struck six, when

a cab stopped at the arched entrance to Dean's Yard. A tall, slight, graceful female figure sprang out. Her face was completely concealed by a double gossamer veil. Her form was enveloped in a large dark cloak.

The lady hastily gave the cabman some silver. It must have been treble his fare, for he actually touched his glazed hat, and said—

“Thank ye, miss. You're a lady, and no mistake; and if you wants to go back again I won't charge you nothink for vaiting, if you aint unreasonable long, which females—excuse me, miss—sometimes is when we agrees not to charge for vaiting.”

“I do not wish you to wait for me, I thank you, coachman,” said the girl (for she had the form and voice of girlhood), and she hastened into Dean's Yard.

The cabman—a jolly, purple-faced fellow, with a very knowing look—peered through the archway at her receding form, looked into the cab to see if she had left anything, shut

up the vehicle, beat his arms violently across his broad chest, for it was very cold, winked at the moon, for there was no one else to wink at, and muttered to himself—

“Poor thing! she wor in a fluster she wor, and all of a tremble. She’s out on the sly she is. Sweethearts, male or fee-male, is always our best riders. Love’s the boy for making the money fly and the mare to go. Well, if she did tell me to drive fast, she paid me ’ansome; and no ’arm done,” he added, stroking his horse, who was steaming and panting, while he hung a bag of corn under his nose. “You desarves a hextra feed, old jade,” he said, “and I a hextra drop; and I’ll have it, too, and no mistake.”

“Want a cab, sir?” he shouted, as he stood near the horse, to a young gentleman, deformed and rather lame, who approached hurriedly.

“No; but I want to speak to you, cabby.”

Cabby had taken the bag off his horse’s nose and mounted his box.

He did not seem inclined to come down.

"I'll make it worth your while to answer me," said the gentleman, impatiently.

Cabby was down in an instant.

"Didn't you drive a tall, slender young lady, veiled and in a dark cloak, from Brompton to this place?" asked the stranger, poking a sharp, pale face, with glittering eyes, whose brightness was heightened by spectacles, close to the cabman's purple nose.

The cabman looked steadily at his questioner, eyed him from top to toe, scratched his head, and saying, "Let me consider a bit," thought to himself, "He's arter no good. Don't like his looks; he've got an evil eye. He aint no gal's sweetheart; 'taint loikely."

The gentleman held out half-a-crown.

Cabby clutched at it, and said—

"My last fare wor a party with one eye and a wooden leg—a elderly ooman, soizeable loike. I took her up in Queer Street. She wor a little screwed. I can't say no more.

I 'opes that's the party you're arter, sir ; but I'm keeping that 'ere waluable, first-rate hunchback a-shivering in the cold. So I wishes ye good evening, sir, and thank ye ;" then added to himself, "I've done she a good turn, I'm sartain, and she desarved it, for she paid me 'ansome."

"Fool—cursed fool !" cried the hunchback, with an oath.

"Fool be I ? then there's a pair on us !" shouted cabby, driving off.

The hunchback did not reply ; he did not hear him ; he had turned fiercely away, and entered Dean's Yard.

"I know I am on her track," he muttered ; "and now, through that jabbering sot, I may have lost the chance of finding out what she is doing ; what took her to Brompton ; what is her object in driving to such a place as this at such an hour. I cannot have been misinformed. I think that drunken cabman was hoaxing me though ; I saw it in his eye.

Yet what mystery can bring her here? Ha!" he inwardly exclaimed, as, looking towards the ancient cloisters at the corner of the yard, he saw a tall female form standing in the moonlight, her back towards him, at the very entrance of those antique aisles. "'Tis she, by all that's fortunate!" he murmured, and he drew his hat over his brows, and folded his cloak around his mis-shapen form, as he slunk into the dark shadows cast by the massive buildings; and moving in a crab-like manner, but swiftly and silently along, contrived, as the lady timidly entered those dark and gloomy arches, to glide in unperceived, and hide himself behind a massive pillar.

There was not a creature in the yard, not a sound, save the distant hum that reminds one that none are near.

The lady raised her veil, and the moon shone on a lovely face pale as her own.

Poor girl! she trembled in every limb as she moved a few steps forward, and thought

of the dead that lay beneath her feet, and glanced at the monumental slabs on the walls, and marked the moonbeams flitting like ghosts from pillar to pillar.

“How terrible to be alone here,” she said to herself. “When will they come?”

Alone! It was terrible to be alone in such a spot, but far more terrible to be so near the being who, completely hidden from her view, was gazing intently upon her, and noting her every gesture and movement.

As he watched her, he saw her take from her pocket a white rosette, and pin it on her breast. He understood that it was a preconcerted signal, by which some one in that “darkness visible” was to recognise her. His teeth were set, his hands clenched, his face alternately pale and red.

“What can it all mean?” he said to himself, as, from the farther end of the aisle, a young woman approached with something in her arms.

As she rapidly drew nigh, the outline of a babe, wrapped in a shawl, was picked out by the moonlight, and a white satin bow was seen gleaming in the moonlight on the young woman's breast too.

"Thank Heaven!" murmured the lady, "it is she, and she has brought the child."

She moved forward, and holding out her arms, received the sleeping infant, and for some moments her quick sobs and soft kisses alone broke the silence, responded to by the low coo of the infant as it nestled in her bosom.

While thus engrossed, absorbed by her passionate endearments, a firm, quick step echoed through the vault-like aisles, and a tall, elegant young man, approaching the group, exclaimed—

"My love! my angel! is it indeed you? and were you not afraid, my lovely one, to come here alone, so dark, so late as it is? Does not this meeting, and this our old tryst-

ing place, recall the few bright hours that seemed an age of joy?"

"They do, indeed, my own!" said the lady.

"Heaven bless you, my treasure," cried the young man; "is that our little one, child of life's spring, first snowdrop of the year?"

And he encircled the lady and the child with his arms, and tenderly kissing both, he said, "I shall lose the last train, my beloved, if I stay one moment more, and, if I lose the train, I lose my passage too."

"Oh, go, then, my beloved, go. I am not so weak, so selfish, as to wish to keep you. Go, and Heaven's blessing and mine go with you."

One long embrace of that fond, graceful, clinging girl—one soft kiss on the fair babe's brow—and he was gone.

"Heaven bless him!" sobbed the weeping lady.

"Curse him!" almost hissed the hunchback, livid with rage and jealousy.

"I musn't keep the blessed babby one minute longer in this *unkid catakomb* of a place," said the woman; "why, bless its little heart, if it isn't beginning to shiver already. Whatever will you do, ma'am? Won't you venture a bit of the way with us?"

"Oh, no, no, I dare not; but go now, and mind you wrap the darling well up," she cried, kissing it again and again. "Stay not another moment."

"In ten minutes we'll be home, ma'am, by a good fire, and in a little while the blessed babe 'll have had its bath and its bottle, and be asleep in the cot," said the woman, hurrying away.

"Stop," said the lady, giving her a small parcel; "you have my directions? You know exactly what to do, and how to do it. Put this on across its chest, and round its waist, and, oh! take every care of my treasure, and may God prosper our plans."

"Amen!" said the woman, hurrying away.

The lady sank on her knees in silent prayer, and after remaining thus some minutes, she arose and left the cloisters.

As she looked back for a moment at the mysterious depths behind her, she fancied she saw clearly defined on that part of the wall which was white in the moonlight, a gnome-like figure, its natural deformity much exaggerated in the shadow, like that of an evil destiny pursuing her.

“My morbid fancy only,” she said with a shudder. “Yet, how like——”

The name was lost in the howl of the wind that met her, and was soon whistling through the cloisters. She looked up. The sky was changed, clouds were careering about, and as she hurried out of Dean’s Yard, the snow began to fall fast and thick, blinding her eyes, and making it impossible for one not intimately acquainted with the spot to be certain of her whereabouts.

CHAPTER II.

There's a temple whose proud elevation
Ascends through the mists of the day,
And around it a dense population
In squalid and hungry array.

ANON.

THE lady, as she left the arched entrance to Dean's Yard, felt uncertain which way to go.

There was a cab-stand not very far off, but the snow prevented her seeing it.

She hurried on in the direction of some flickering lights, and found herself in the Broadway. Here was a new and startling phase of life for the delicate daughter of

luxury and fashion. Here, in spite of cold and snow, costermongers of both sexes cried themselves hoarse in lauding their wares. The whole street was lined with their stalls. Candle-lamps threw their dull light on wooden trays of herrings, sprats, and dried haddocks ; on pigs' feet and tripe ; on piles of turnips, carrots, cabbages, potatoes ; on stalls laden with coarse earthenware ; on stands of clumsy boots and shoes, and scores of cheap trinkets, bits of coloured glass set in mosaic gold ; and girls and women, with their wet, discoloured feet, through their worn boots, and their clothes in tatters, crowded round the tempting trumpery, trying to cheapen a necklace or a brooch.

There, too, were ragged urchins "caten-wheeling" in the snow, and drunken women, with famished infants at their wasted, disordered bosoms, screaming, laughing, shouting, and fighting.

"Oh, what a dreadful place," said the

frightened lady to herself, as she was suddenly surrounded by lucifer-selling imps imploring her to buy ; costermongers shouting in her ear ; and drunken, abandoned women looking fiercely, as they always do, at the well-dressed, modest, and respectable of their sex.

The lady had gathered up her rich silk robe, for the Broadway was become a perfect swamp with dirt and molten snow ; and she was unconscious that, in raising her dress, her little delicate foot and ankle, the former in a Paris boot, and the latter in a silk stocking, were exposed to view ; nor yet that the rich and elaborate embroidery of her petticoat was displayed.

“ My eye, there’s a swell ! ” said a bold, shaggy girl, “ there’s open ’ork for ye.”

“ Well, we’ve got open ’ork too,” said another, holding up her ‘ looped and windowed raggedness,’ “ only it aint of the right sort.”

“ Let’s have a look at her mug,” said the

first, and she rudely tried forcibly to raise the lady's veil.

Poor lady, wild with terror, she rushed in at the first door to ask for help and shelter.

Outside, a woman, with a black eye and cut lip, was selling hot roasted potatoes. Inside, as the lady darted into the little bare room on the ground-floor, she saw a drunken man asleep on the ground, and a group of ragged, unwashed children playing with a very few dirty cards, by the light which the street lamp threw into the squalid room. The lady stood for a moment on the threshold. The children espied her, and set up a shout. The father woke, and seizing his pewter pot, raised it, as he said—

“Get out—we want no fine lady-preachers and teachers here. Come to spy out the nakedness of the land, are ye? We want bread, we want money; we don't want no jaw. Whether ye're a Ranter or a Puseyite, we want what ye won't give us, and not what

ye will ; we wants bread, not books ; and clothes, not catechisms ; and a little tea and sugar, not tracts ; and I wants a drop of beer above all. So get out—out with ye, I say, or I'll make ye !”

He hurled the pewter pot at her head, but luckily it missed its aim. The lady rushed out, and darting across the Broadway, looked anxiously up and down to see if she could discern a cab.

“ Will you buy a nice pin-cushion, miss, or a pair of side-combs ?” said a motherly-looking woman, who kept a little stall of such small matters.

“ I will presently,” gasped the lady ; “ but I’ve been frightened by some rude women and a drunken man. Can you let me sit down for a minute, and will you give me a glass of water ?”

“ To be sure I can, and welcome, too, miss. Step this way, miss. Nancy, show a light. Bill, go and mind the stall. Poor young

lady, you aint used to such rough customers, I'll warrant, nor to the Broadway by night. Lawk-a-daisy, you're as cold as a stone ; sit down here in my good man's chear. I'll stir up the fire. There—let me take off your bonnet a bit. Have a cup o' tea—do, now, do'ee. I'd just got my good man's tea ready. He likes a good cup o' tea, and so does I."

The lady smiled her thanks. She looked round. All was clean, neat, and bright. A good fire blazed. The hearth was nicely swept. Tea, bread, cheese, butter, and red-herrings were neatly set out on a round table, and four little children, with smooth hair, newly washed faces, and clean night-gowns, were, before going to bed, singing their hymns to an elder girl in a little adjoining room. In a snug corner by the fire was an old-fashioned wicker cradle, yellow with time, and with very large rockers, and in it slept a chubby, healthy baby ; its infantine and un-

conscious grace curiously contrasted with the stiff ugliness of a large old-fashioned wooden doll, without which "baby" would not go to sleep, and whose one eye glared fiercely at the sleeping cherub, whose little rosy hand clutched its few rough locks, through which might be seen a black skull-cap nailed to the wooden head. A little pale, bright-eyed boy rocked the cradle.

"What good children!" said the lady; "what a fine baby! and what a nice, tidy home!"

"I does my best to keep it so," said the woman, with honest pride. "We're very poor, and we've a hard job to get a living, miss; and we can't afford no school but the ragged school in Pear Street, Duck Lane, miss. But, lawk-a-daisy! there aint no better for teaching all a Christian wants to know; and then, miss, my master aint like some, he don't drink, he brings me home all he earns. He says, for he've a bit of fun in him, 'men

wor made to bring money in, and women to lay it out.’ ”

“ And very well said, too,” replied the lady, smiling, “ I wish all husbands were as sensible. How fond your little boy seems of the baby, he rocks it so gently.”

“ Ah, that he dó, ma’am, he’s as good as a mother to it.”

“ I fear he is not very healthy,” said the lady. “ He has not the chubby, rosy cheeks of the rest.”

“ To tell you the truth, miss, he aint mine, though I love him as if he were. He’s a nurse-child, miss. His father’s a gentleman in the lor—lives in the Temple—but he don’t get much business, and aint very well. Still, in his own mar’s time, nothing wor too good for that ’ere boy ; but she died, and he married again—a fine young woman to look at, but such a ‘temper,’ quite a ‘cure.’ And she hates that boy like poison ; and I was his nurse, and so he’s here. Is the tea to your

liking, miss? Have a bit of bread and butter. The leastest bit—do, miss. Ah, here's my master, Joe.—The young lady got a fright, Joe, and took shelter here."

Joe pulled his forelock.

"Proud o' the honour, miss," he said, putting into his wife's extended hand the wages he had just received.

The lady rose.

"Could any one fetch me a cab?" she said.

"I will gladly, miss," said Joe, not sorry to be out of such grand company.

The lady rose, went into the inner room to hear the children say their hymns, gave each a shilling, and half-a-crown to the eldest girl, who was teaching them. She then drew near the cradle, bent over it, blessed the sleeping babe, and dropped a tear on its pillow, as she thought, perhaps, of another cherub fairer and dearer.

"Here's a shilling for your little money-box," she said to the delicate boy who was

rocking the cradle. "What will you do with it?"

"I shall buy baby a pair of red shoes," said the boy.

"But baby can't walk."

"Never mind, she will soon. I shall teach her." He looked very proud as he said so.

The lady then bought a few little boxes and other trifles, and asked the good woman for her name and address. The name proved to be Toddles. The stranger took her leave, for Joe had returned with a cab.

When she was gone, Mrs. Toddles found that the lady had adroitly inserted a sovereign into the little closed hand of the baby. It was a great godsend, for trade had been bad of late, and Joe had been, till quite recently, out of work.

The lady drove away to a quiet house in a dull street in the West-end. More than once, as they passed along Victoria Street, with its new, massive buildings, she had seen the

shadow of the cab in which she was, thrown by the moonlight on the walls, and she fancied that behind it the mis-shapen, shrouded figure seemed to ride; but when she let down the window to look out, nothing was there.

How much she had learnt in that brief visit to the Broadway! She thought of the drunkard's home and his dirty untaught children; and then her mind turned to the sober Joe; his kind, thrifty wife and little ones, and their ragged-school hymns, the pale boy, and the rosy babe. As she entered the house at which she stopped, she again fancied she saw, reflected and exaggerated on the other side of the pavement, that shadow, mysterious and deformed, that seemed to haunt her.

"It cannot be!" she said to herself, hurrying upstairs as the door closed. "He is far away, and if he were not, why should he haunt me? He knows I cannot love him. Oh, conscience! thou dost, indeed, make cowards of us all! 'Twas but a phantom shadow

conjured up by an excited fancy." So saying, the lady retired to her room.

Her head ached with anxious thoughts. Her heart was full of love and sorrow. For a long time she had known no refreshing sleep. Self-centred, she had dwelt only on her own troubles and dangers.

But this night her thoughts, after her prayers were said, turned to others—the wretched home of the ribald, the profane drunkard. His skeleton children and their dirty cards rose before her mental vision, contrasting with the happy home of the good Joe and his motherly, notable wife.

The little ragged-school hymn of the clean-faced, good children, sounded pleasantly in her ear, and as the pale, bright-eyed boy, rocking the cradle, rose on her mind's eye, she dropped asleep to the remembered music of the little hymn.

Good thoughts are often the parents of good deeds. It may be so with her.

She smiled in her sleep, as if good angels were prompting her dreams. Meanwhile, on the sheet of moonlit snow that covered the quiet street, and which a sharp frost had hardened, might be seen, moving slowly up and down, the mysterious and mis-shapen shadow — until a policeman, his suspicions aroused by the steady watch kept on that house by the shrouded figure to which that shadow belonged, began to watch in his turn, and at last to question, and then shadow and substance disappeared, and all was still in the street, save for the measured tread of the policeman.

CHAPTER III.

The stately homes of England,
How beautiful they stand !
Amid their tall ancestral trees,
O'er all the blooming land.

MRS. HEMANS.

WOODHURST COURT was an old-fashioned English home. Woodhurst of Woodhurst was its master.

He was a man of very ancient family, and Woodhurst, as far as records went, had always been the home of that family, until the father of the present proprietor, by gambling, extravagance, and dissipation of every kind

had brought ruin and disgrace to his hearth, and the home and the lands of his ancestors to the hammer.

He died in the Old Fleet Prison, probably by his own hand, for there was a rumour that he had taken poison ; but the case was not sifted. He had been a widower for some years when he died, and he left a family, quite unprovided for, to struggle with the world.

An only son, and five beings even more helpless than himself, because they were girls, were thus thrown on the world at the same time. Young Woodhurst himself was then about twelve, and was the youngest of the beggared family.

Poor old Woodhurst had so long been going down, down, down in the world, that he had not a friend left, to whom his children could turn, when the final smash came. He had borrowed of everyone who would lend, and unpaid lenders become bitter foes.

His wife had been a poor beauty of humble

birth, and in his pride and folly he had despised all her relations; but when he had been consigned to a pauper's grave by the parish, some of them (though poor, yet Christians, and therefore ready to forgive) invited the girls to stay with them till they could "turn themselves round."

It was thus that the eldest got married to Mr. Bussel, a pickle-seller; and the pretty Lydia to an undertaker, a master undertaker, called Lackaday. And it is thus the classes get fused in these times.

Low as they were in the world, they had had high notions, but they had good common sense, and that dread of idleness and extravagance which we often see in the children of spendthrifts.

Young Woodhurst had a capital head, a strong will, a fund of honest pride and honourable ambition. He loved with a love amounting to a passion, the home of his childhood and of his ancestors. The aim, the

ambition of his life, was to buy it back, and to end his days as Woodhurst of Woodhurst. He knew that lowliness is young ambition's ladder. He knew that many of our millionaires have begun life as errand-boys, sweeping out the counting-houses where, in the end, they reign supreme.

He determined to tread in their steps. He rose as they had done. He got employment in the house of a great City firm. Zealous, watchful, thrifty, punctual, strictly honest, a good arithmetician (though chiefly self-taught), he became a junior clerk, then a head clerk, then a partner, married the daughter of the head of the firm, and at the opening of this tale was Woodhurst of Woodhurst, with all the woods and fields that had ever belonged to the old place, and with an income and a capital ten times greater than that of any preceding Woodhurst of Woodhurst.

His sisters had all married save one, who was now a staid spinster of sixty, helping his

only daughter to keep his house, for he was a widower.

His eldest sister, Mrs. Bussel, had married soon after her father's death—married a vulgar man, well to do—for a home. The second was the widow of Lackaday, the undertaker—poor and nervous. The third, who had been very beautiful in her youth, had been a companion to a lady of rank, and had made a runaway match with that lady's nephew, a gay young officer of the name of Bird. She followed him to India, and died there. He soon after fell in battle, and their orphan girl was adopted by Woodhurst of Woodhurst, and brought up with his own darling.

There was one sister more, also a widow. She had married a wealthy widower, father of her pupils, for she had been a governess, and she had one son on whom she doted.

All the relations of Woodhurst of Woodhurst were invited to the old family-house, to keep Christmas in the good old style—all

except his orphan niece. She, about a year before, had, though wooed by an elderly squire, high sheriff for the county, and immensely rich, married a poor curate, and that, too, in defiance of her uncle, whose tenderness and pride were equally wounded by this rash and imprudent marriage. As she was of age, she was her own mistress, and as her uncle's remonstrances were vain, so his anger was excessive. He ordered her picture to be removed from the walls of the dining-hall, and commanded all his family and household to abstain from naming or alluding to her.

This was a great sorrow to the beautiful Wilhelmina, commonly called Mina Woodhurst, who was devoted to her cousin; and, in truth, Ladybird, as she was always called, was a most lovely and loveable creature.


At school her *sobriquet* of Ladybird was given her because there was something so dainty, so refined, and so elegant in her person and manners, that her young com-

panions playfully prefixed the word Lady to her surname of Bird, and it seemed so appropriate, that everyone adopted it.

Nothing had been heard of Ladybird since her imprudent marriage, except that her husband had obtained a most laborious, ill-paid curacy, in Bethnal Green, which report said his health would compel him to relinquish.


Mr. Woodhurst had forbidden his niece to try to see or to write to him or to any of the family, and the once-familiar name of Ladybird was banished from every lip.

Deeply had Woodhurst of Woodhurst loved her, and bitterly he resented her disobedience and defiance. There was a great deal too much of Woodhurst pride and ambition in this now prosperous man; but from his boyhood wealth and station had been his great objects, and he wished to do away with the memory of the past, and to strengthen his connection with the county families by marrying his daughter and his niece to men of rank



and wealth. With regard to his Mina—his superb, haughty, splendid Mina—he had in his inmost heart fixed on a very great man, a peer of the realm—the proud Earl of Beaudesert, lord of the neighbouring castle—as Mina’s husband, but as yet he had kept these ambitious hopes to himself.

He felt that he had accelerated Ladybird’s rash match by urging her to accept the old, gouty high sheriff, and he did not even hint at his heart’s dearest wish to Mina; but he delighted to see the superb and cold reserve with which she received the homage of all the young men of her acquaintance, and he loved to see her gazing on the grey old turrets of Beaudesert Castle, and to mark how the earl’s eyes at church were fixed on her beautiful face.



CHAPTER IV.

How shall we celebrate the day
When God appeared in mortal clay,
The mark of worldly scorn—
When the archangel's heavenly lays
Attempted the Redeemer's praise,
And hailed salvation's dawn!

CHATTERTON.

AN English home is a very beautiful thing, whether that home be a lordly castle, a cosy villa, or a snug cottage. Woodhurst House was something less than a castle, and more than a villa. Such a home is dearer to its owner than some grand, palatial hall, "where comfort dies in vastness," and where the

master or lord of the mansion is more a guest than a host.

Woodhurst was the perfection of a home for an English gentleman and his family. Part of it was very old, and had been a manor-house centuries ago, but many additions had been made—all in great taste—and which rendered Woodhurst House a most commodious family mansion.

It stood on a gentle slope, surrounded by a park, woods behind, water before it, and remarkable for the size and beauty of its trees—above all, its noble hollies and other evergreens. Liberally did the fine old hollies contribute to the decoration of Woodhurst at the merry Christmas-time; and tastefully indeed did Mina Woodhurst and her maiden aunt, Miss Tabitha Woodhurst, decorate the hall, the dining and the drawing rooms, with the rich wreaths of dark, glossy, prickly holly; translucent mistletoe berries, with their pale green leaves; laurel, laurustinus, and bay.

Mrs. Bussel would not help, because she thought it wasteful and "high church" to use so much holly, and Mrs. Lackaday was too lazy ever to lend a helping hand; so Mina and Aunt Tabby had all the trouble and all the glory and praise.

Christmas was a more than usually gay, exciting, and busy time this year at Woodhurst, for Aunt Tabby intended to hold, during the Christmas week, a bazaar, or fancy fair, in the schools, the object being to provide a home for young servant-girls when out of place.

Mina had been for some months past on visits to various friends, and had brought back many promises and many performances too. Aunt Tabby was very popular, and every day, and all day long, contributions came pouring in.

Mina sat calm and stately, generally working at some *chef-d'œuvre* of taste and skill. Mrs. Bussel, sharp, meddling, very stingy, and rather spiteful, said "charity begins at home,"

and commenced making Bussel a set of shirts. Mrs. Lackaday began all sorts of fancy works, which Mina and Aunt Tabby had to finish.

Sometimes Lord Beaudesert would ride over, and offer to make himself useful—carding silk, winding wools, holding scissors, or marking prices—but always keeping as close as possible to the beautiful Mina.

The Woodhurst family party was complete, save only Aunt Mountjoy and her son Gaspar. Mina and kind Aunt Tabby thought poor Ladybird and her husband ought to have been included, but they dared not even hint at such a thing.

Mr. Woodhurst was in great good-humour at the frequent visits of the earl. The schools were in a state of preparation for the fancy fair—the walls were hung with white and rose drapery, and festooned with evergreens and paper flowers, admirably made by Mina. Every room in the house was full of boxes, baskets, paper parcels, cases, &c. &c.

Miss Tabby was in a state of great excitement, and Mina—cold, proud, and calm, as she seemed—smiled a sunny smile to see her aunt so pleased.

CHAPTER V.

O, aye my wife she dang me,
And aft my wife did bang me :
If ye gie a woman a' her will,
Guid faith she'll soon o'ergang ye.
On peace and rest my mind was bent,
And, fool was I, I married ;
But never honest man's intent
So thoroughly miscarried.

BURNS.

It was Christmas-eve, and the family party was assembled at breakfast.

It was in the large and lofty old hall that the meals were always served up when there were guests at Woodhurst. A glorious

Christmas fire blazed in the antique and hugely cavernous chimney-place. The yule log was at the back of a noble pile of coals and billets—the red fire-light gleamed and played with a life-like glow on old family portraits of many generations of Woodhursts of Woodhurst, and which the present master of “The Court” had brought down from the lofts and lumber-rooms in which they had been stowed away while Woodhurst was in other hands. There they had remained with their faces to the wall, dusty, cobweb-hung, and crowded and cluttered up with hatchments, armorial bearings, worked or painted by hands once fair, but now dust; old hangings, old books, screens, desks, boxes, chests; while out of all this lumber, here and there was thrust the long beak of a stork, in wood or stone—the crest of the Woodhursts.

Woodhurst of Woodhurst was no sooner repossessed of the Court, than the family portraits were reframed, restored, and re-

placed ; and the storks once more enthroned on their antique pedestals, displacing the griffins adopted by the late *parvenu* proprietor of the place.

The snowy damask cloth was laid for breakfast. The delicate china, and the costly silver glittered in the firelight. Mina presided over the tea, and Aunt Tabby dispensed the coffee ; delicacies were set out on the table and substantial on the sideboard. The stained-glass windows, deeply embrasured in the solid old walls, reached down to the low black oak window-seats, which were cushioned with crimson damask.

Miss Tabby, on entering the hall, looked proudly round on many parcels, boxes, baskets, &c. &c., all contributions to her bazaar, and many of which she had not had time to open.

Woodhurst of Woodhurst read prayers to the whole household, including the servants, and then the family sat down to the breakfast-table.

Mina was rather pale and dispirited. It was exactly a year that very day, since her cousin and chosen friend Ladybird had announced her determination to marry Mr. Morris, the curate of Woodhurst, and had left the Hall for a friend's house in town, after a terrible scene with her uncle. No wonder Mina was so pale! She had loved Ladybird as a sister!

Ladybird was, or rather had been, the sunshine of Woodhurst. Full of mirth, glee, spirit, frolic, everyone missed her, and in his inmost heart none so much as her uncle.

Mina was calm, silent, reserved—seemed almost cold and unsympathising—not that she was so—but Ladybird was all life, sympathy, energy, action. The cousins were very much alike in form and feature; it was in expression and colouring that there was such a contrast between them. Ladybird's hair was of the lightest gold, and hung round her fair, rosy face in a profusion of long, wild

ringlets. Mina's jet-black tresses were combed off her forehead, and gathered in rich coils round her classic head. Ladybird's blue eyes laughed in unison with her cherry lips. Mina's large black orbs were proud and serious, and her beautiful mouth smiled but rarely. They had loved each other all the better for the contrast in their tempers and styles. Ladybird had required sobering, and Mina wanted a little more life ; and when they lived together each influenced the other to advantage.

Several times Mina glanced to the place on the wall where Ladybird's sunny portrait used to hang. A grim old Woodhurst of Woodhurst frowned where she had smiled.

Aunt Tabby, too, glanced at that spot, and was silent. Old Woodhurst never in that direction at all.

The post-bag was brought to him.

"A letter from sister Mountjoy," he said, opening one. "I fear it is an excuse."

"Oh, I hope not," said Aunt Tabby. "We

cannot spare one of our Christmas family party."

"Neither sister Mountjoy nor her son can join us," said Mr. Woodhurst, handing the letter to Aunt Tabby. "He is very ill—inflammation of the chest and brain-fever; but our sister says, the doctors give her hopes of his recovery."

"Poor thing!" whined lazy Mrs. Lackaday. "What trouble she's had with that son of her's! I'm thankful I've no children to trouble me; I've enough on my mind without."

"I don't think you'd trouble yourself if you had a dozen," put in Mrs. Bussel. "I'm sorry sister Mountjoy can't come; but we're a very large party as it is."

"The more the merrier," chuckled good-natured, fat Mr. Bussel.

"Yes, but the fewer the better cheer," sharply retorted Mrs. Bussel, who, though born at Woodhurst, was in reality far more

vulgar in mind and feeling, than the retired pickle-seller.

"I dare say Gaspar 'll do, if they'll let him," added sharp Mrs. Bussel; "doctors make half the diseases they profess to cure—

"'What did you bleed him for? now tell me, villain.'

'Sir,' he replied, 'I bled him for a shilling—'

contains the whole secret; only guineas, and hundreds of guineas, should take the place of a shilling."

"Well, I'm sure, my love, when you were so ill, Dr. Darling got you about again; and he deserves all your gratitude, my love."

"And not yours, I suppose, Mr. Bussel? You'd have been more thankful if it had been the other way, Mr. Bussel, I dare say," replied the lady.

"How can you say so, sister Bussel?" put in kind Aunt Tabby. "Never was a man in such fear and anxiety as poor Bussel was when you were so ill."

"Yes, lest I should recover," jeered the lady.

Breakfast being over, the party rose.

"Is that a bassinette, or a berceaunette, as it is the fashion to call it now?" asked Mr. Woodhurst, pointing to a large parcel in the shape of a very small cradle, and which was placed on the seat under the principal window.

"Oh, of course it is," said Aunt Tabby. "Nothing sells better at a fancy fair than a very smartly-trimmed bassinette. I have asked several of my friends to send me one, that I might get up a good raffle for it. At Lady Lofty's bazaar there was one, and old Miss Ironside won it, and it made so much fun. Come and let us have a look at this. I wonder who has sent it? Do you know, Burton, who brought it?"

"No, ma'am, I didn't take it in. I dare say one of the gardeners did, for it was not here last night when I saw to the fastenings."

"Well, let's have a look at it before I go out," said Woodhurst of Woodhurst. "What a quantity of rubbish you have got together, Tabby," he said, laughingly.

"Yes," said Mrs. Bussel, "how people do squander their time and their money on useless, ridiculous absurdities! White muslin penwipers, white satin kettle-holders, studded with steel beads; baby's bibs embroidered with coloured silks, and pillows covered with work done in glass beads, that would cut one's eye out! Let's have a look at the bassinette—I dare say it's all crusted inside with glass and steel—and then I'm off to my work, Bussel's shirts."

Aunt Tabby led the way to the window-seat.

The bassinette was very slightly packed up in silver paper.

"It has not come from any great distance," said Aunt Tabby, "packed like that."

"From Beaudesert Castle, perhaps," said

Mr. Woodhurst. "A bit of fun of the earl's," and he glanced at Mina, who blushed and grew pale alternately, (a very good sign, as he thought.)

"To be kept this side upwards."

"To be opened with great care, and not shaken, on account of the wax doll inside."

"To be kept dry."

Such were the directions on three cards attached to the parcel.

"Oh, that's his lordship all over," said Mr. Woodhurst, "washing his hands with invisible soap in imperceptible water;" "he's so fond of his joke."

Aunt Tabby was quite excited. She placed the bassinette on a large table, and very carefully unpacked it.

It was a very pretty little bassinette, trimmed with pink silk and white lace. The curtains were drawn; she lifted them up. All pressed eagerly forward.

"It's warm!" cried Aunt Tabby, as she was about to raise the "wax doll."

"Warm! what's warm?" cried Mr. Woodhurst.

"It's a living child, and a very fine one, too," said Mr. Bussel.

"And laid at your door, brother," almost screamed the excited Mrs. Bussel. "It's well it wasn't at yours, Bussel," she said. "I'd have led you a fine life if it had been, guilty or not guilty."

"Unless it had been laid there by you, my love," said Bussel. "It would have been very welcome, then."

Mrs. Bussel bit her lips—her childlessness was a very sore point with her.

Did quiet old Bussel know it, think you, dear reader? "Still waters run deep."

Mr. Woodhurst was lividly pale and trembling with passion.

"That child is Ladybird's," he said to himself, "and she depends on my tenderness

and the old love I had for her, to make me shelter and bring it up."

Ladybird was also on Aunt Tabby's lip and in her heart.

Mina had burst into tears, and had stooped to kiss the sleeping cherub.

There was a dead silence. Aunt Tabby sobbed. Old Bussel wiped his eyes in his red silk pocket-handkerchief, marked and hemmed by his model wife.

Mr. Woodhurst's features worked convulsively; they betrayed an inward tempest.

"Brother," at length exclaimed Mrs. Bussel, "don't be tricked into adopting that bold, ungrateful baggage's brat, don't! Off with it to the workhouse! If it's hers that's the place for it as she's married a pauper. If it's any other brazen hussy's, let the parish officers compel her to swear it. But send it at once to the union! Bussel shall carry it, and I'll go with it and explain."

"I'll do no such thing, Mrs. Bussel," said, in a loud and manly voice, the hitherto hen-pecked husband, but now the roused lion.

"No, you're not man enough," screeched the lady.

"Be it so," said, at length, Woodhurst of Woodhurst, in a voice husky with rage. "She married a pauper! Let it go to the union!"

"I heard she was in that way some time ago," cried Mrs. Bussel, who had always hated poor Ladybird, to whom she grudged the maintenance and favours which she thought ought to have been hers, and she now feared a new rival in the sleeping cherub before her.

"Brother," sobbed Aunt Tabby, "don't send it to the union. Forgive, as you would be forgiven. A Woodhurst sent to the union—a child with Woodhurst blood in its veins! and that when you are as your forefathers were, Woodhurst of Woodhurst!"

"Oh, papa," cried Mina, kneeling in tears

at her father's feet, "let it stay here. Do not send it away."

"Take it to the union, sister," said Mr. Woodhurst, turning to Mrs. Bussel.

"Brother," cried Aunt Tabby, "look at it," and she took it out of its bassinette, and held it towards him. "What is this—see, brother, what is written on this paper?"

"Answer me, woman, is this your doing? Are you in league with that ingrate? Did you know of this?" cried Mr. Woodhurst.

"No, brother, I swear to you, by my hopes of Heaven, I know nothing of it."

"How could it get placed where we found it without the help and connivance of some inmate of the house?" asked Mr. Woodhurst, sternly. "Summon all the servants."

Aunt Tabby rang the bell. The servants were sent for. None knew anything about the bassinette, and such numbers of contributions, large and small, were sent from all parts for Miss Woodhurst's bazaar, that none could

remember whether it was on the window-seat when the fire was lighted and the hall swept.

The snow outside had been trodden down. There were prints of a woman's feet, larger than Ladybird's certainly, and there were some tracks across the park.

The servants being dismissed, Aunt Tabby said, taking up a paper from the bassinette—

“Read this, brother, do.”

“Mr. Woodhurst read first this paper, on which was written in Old English characters—

“Not yet Christened. To be called Mary.”

Ladybird's own name was Mary. And then his eye ran over an inscription worked in gold on a broad purple ribbon that crossed the babe's breast and encircled its waist—

“Inasmuch as ye have done it to the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

“He that giveth a cup of cold water in my name shall not lose his reward.”

“Beware that ye offend not one of these little ones.”

Mr. Woodhurst put out his hand to thrust away the child Aunt Tabby was forcing on his notice.

At this moment the infant opened a pair of large blue eyes, and seizing with its little rosy, dimpled hand the worn, worldly old finger of Mr. Woodhurst, drew that finger into its little soft mouth, and began to suck it.

The moist, warm touch of those little velvet lips thawed in one instant the ice of pride and the frostwork of worldliness that had crusted round the old man's heart.

Mrs. Bussel, fearing the result of the infant's unconscious appeal, officially came forward at that moment, saying—

“I'll take it to the union myself, at once, brother!”

“Off, harpy! Off, woman of the stony heart!” thundered out Woodhurst, as the tears gushed from his eyes, and he stooped to kiss the child. “See to it, Tabby; see to it, Mina. I do not forgive La—, its mother, but send

her money, sister ; send it anonymously, do not write to her. I do not forgive, but she must not want. Tabby, I adopt the innocent child—do you and Mina see to it.”

And he hurried out of the hall.

“ Rise, Mina, dearest !” said Aunt Tabby.

But Mina had fainted.

CHAPTER VI.

Come on, poor babe !
Some powerful spirit instruct
The kites and ravens
To be thy nurses.
Wolves and bears, they say, casting
Their savageness aside, have done
Like offices of pity.

SHAKESPEARE.

WHEN Mina recovered from the deep swoon into which she had sunk as she knelt by the window-seat, sobbing over the little cherub in the bassinette, she found herself lying on a sofa in the hall. Aunt Tabby was chafing her hands ; old Bussel was fanning her with the newspaper ; Mrs. Bussel, with a large pair

of "cutters-out" (sharp and cold as herself), was just about to sever her laces; Mrs. Lackaday, with her hands folded and her eyes cast up, was doing nothing but asking, as such people always do, what is to be done?

"How are you now, my darling?" said kind Aunt Tabby.

"Oh, I am quite well now, thank you, Aunt Tabby—thank you all," she said, smiling faintly. "I was very weak and silly, but the babe looked so helpless and innocent—and papa spoke so sternly—and I heard the word 'union,' and I could not bear it—and—"

"No wonder, poor dear! loving Ladybird as you did, you were quite overcome. The sight of that babe would melt a heart of stone," said Aunt Tabby, as she glanced rather angrily at Mrs. Bussel.

"It's my opinion, Tabby," said Mrs. Bussel, "that it was not the innocence of the babe, but the thought of the undutiful wickedness and ingratitude of its brazen mother that so

upset my niece. She's not of the fainting or crying sort ; she takes after me in that." (Mrs. Bussel always paid court to Mina, heiress of Woodhurst, and flattered and conciliated her directly and indirectly.) "Indeed, so good and dutiful as she is, to see that child palmed off on her father in that bold, artful manner by a baggage, the creature of his bounty, who always pretended to love him as a daughter, but was no sooner of age than she disobeyed and defied him, and married a beggar ; and then who contrived such a crafty, audacious plot as this, to have the little wretch forced upon her offended benefactor *nolens volens*, put in at the window in that way, making us all the talk of the place (for who knows what stories may get about ?)—it was enough to shake the strongest nerves !"

"I'm all in a tremble myself," cried old Bussel. "I'm glad Mina's come to, for I think it's high time to consult as to what's to be done with the babe. Even in its sleep it's

sucking its poor little fist, as if it hadn't had a drop for hours, and was as hungry as a hunter."

"Sweet innocent!" said Mina, rising and going towards the bassinette. "What ought it to have, Aunt Tabby?"

"It ought to be sent to the union at once, my dear," said Mrs. Bussel, "if only for its own sake it ought. No one here knows anything of the management of a baby. In the work-house it would be very well off, and some female pauper could suckle it. Why do you redden and look so angry, dear Mina—surely a pauper nurse is good enough for a pauper brat?"

"Oh, do come and look at it," said old Bussel, who had stolen on his broad toes to the little cradle. "It beats any wax-work at Madame Tussaud's."

"What an old noodle you are, Mr. Bussel, excuse my saying so," cried his wife. "What can you know about babies?"

“Nothing, by experience, I own,” said Bussel, mournfully ; “the more’s the pity.”

“Well !” cried his wife, “I never did see anything like the folly of you men. You’ve no more forethought or consideration, Bussel, than a March hare or a tom-cat, and no more care what would become of your offspring. We’ve hardly enough, since our losses, to keep ourselves comfortable, even with all my management, and slaving and contriving, and working my fingers to the bone, up early and late, toiling and moiling from Monday morning till Saturday night ; and yet you’re base enough to wish that I’d a heavier burthen still, and had a dozen children to labour and manage for as well as you ; as it is, I dare say, what with the income tax and the high prices, and the standing army and the war, and my delicate health, we shall end our days in the union, where my only comfort would be that you’d be taken away and put in another ward, where you could not torment and persecute

me any more, as you do now from morning to night."

Mr. Bussel raised his large fat hands and opened his meek eyes very wide.

"Mr. Bussel," added Mrs. Bussel, "mark me! I do believe, before that happens, you'll have driven me into a lunatic asylum; and as everything will go to rack and ruin if I can't see to it, there'll be no money to pay for me, and I shall be sent third-class to Hanwell, and killed in the shower-bath."

Here she burst into tears.

"My dear love," said kind old Bussel, "how you do work yourself up about nothing. I'm very well contented, and very happy as it is; but if it had pleased Heaven to send us one little one, only one—just one like that—"

"Like *that*!" almost screamed Mrs. Bussel. "Why, I never saw an uglier brat. It's got all the worst parts of the face of that pert Ladybird, its mother, and that hypocritical young parson its father. Like that, indeed!

no child of mine would ever have looked like that !”

“ I quite agree with you there, Aunt Bussel,” said Mina, her eyes flashing and her cheeks glowing.

“ I’m glad to hear it, my love,” said the aunt, not noticing Mina’s looks and tones. “ Fah !” she cried, “ it looks—I can’t say what it looks like.”

“ I believe, Aunt Bussel,” said Mina, calmly and proudly, “ that it looks not very unlike that blessed Infant born in a manger, some eighteen hundred and forty years ago, may have looked ere it opened its eyes on the sinful world it came to save !”

“ Well, excuse me, my dear, I may be wrong, but I call that downright profane,” said Mrs. Bussel. “ That blessed babe, even in His cradle, had a halo of glory round His head.”

“ He had,” said Mina, “ but I do not think it was visible to common eyes ; and at any rate, you know, Aunt Bussel, who has said

(and she pointed to the sleeping babe) ‘ of such is the kingdom of heaven ;’ and there is something heavenly to me in the beauty of every young child ere it has smiled at sin, ere the little rosy hand has been hardened by the defiling, petrifying contact with gold, ere the little flower-like feet have become foul and blistered by treading the miry broadway to destruction.”

“ Worse and worse !” almost screamed Mrs. Bussel. “ Born in sin, and a child of wrath, according to the Prayer-book—I go by the Prayer-book—I’m for Church and State—that’s what it is, and that’s what it looks, full of the old Adam and the frail Eve.”

At this moment the babe woke ; probably the screaming voice in which it had been denounced had roused it. It was very hungry, and it began to cry—a good loud cry, too. That cry would not have greatly affected any experienced nurse, but there was no one present who knew anything about babies.

Miss Tabby was in terror—Mina in despair—Mrs. Bussel again urged the union—Mrs. Lackaday cried out, “What is to be done?”—Mr. Bussel asked if, among the female servants, there was no one who knew what to give the babe to eat, or how to manage it?

The maid-servants were all prim, staid, elderly spinsters—chosen on that account by that best of house-keepers, Miss Tabby; but the old kitchen-maid had been in earlier days in a grand nursery as under-nurse. Forty years before, she had even taken a child from the month. She had very old-fashioned notions, certainly, but still, she did know how to handle the delicate, silken, little fragile being, and how to feed, wash, and dress it.

From being the least important person in the establishment, old, hard-featured, long-backed Becky became the most important, thus proving the truth of the adage that “knowledge is power.”

A spare room communicating with Mina’s

dressing and bed-room, and hitherto used for lumber, boxes, &c. &c., was hastily fitted up for the use of baby and Becky.

A noble fire blazed. Aunt Tabby and Mina, with the aid of curtains, blinds, carpets, gay prints, and every necessary article of furniture, made it look very nice, cosy, and snug.

Becky was established in a rocking chair—she would not dispense with that old-fashioned and now much-maligned official seat; and so the village carpenter hastily adjusted a pair of rockers to a broad-backed, low, cushioned chair.

Baby was plentifully fed with old-fashioned “pap,” and Mr. Bussel walked off to the village with a long list of articles which he was to purchase at “the shop.”

CHAPTER VII.

Poor wretch ! that for thy mother's fault
Art thus exposed to want and what may follow.
SHAKSPEERE.

MR. BUSSEL left Mrs. Bussel in the morning room, with a red, sharp, angry face, stitching away with a vengeance at a shirt of his.

Mrs. Lackaday was sitting by the fire, gazing out of the window on the crisp expanse of snow sparkling in the morning sun, and calling the bright-eyed, active robins, who looked in at her from the window-sill, and whom she was too lazy to feed, poor dears ! and wondering what would become of them.

Mina alone could not tear herself from the little stranger. No, not even when Miss Tabby went to attend to household duties, mincemeat, Christmas pudding, roast beef, turkeys, &c. &c., and to superintend the progress of the bazaar.

Miss Tabby had also to see to the distribution among the village poor of blankets and Christmas dinners, and to visit many old and sick *protégés*, and to call and inquire after the under-gardener's wife, a fine young woman, who was just taken ill, and about to give birth to her first child.

On former occasions kind Aunt Tabby had always tried to induce the rather musing, dreamy, absent Mina to assist her in the performance of these duties. But seeing the intense delight and interest which Mina took in "the little stranger," Aunt Tabby, who had a kind, amiable habit of letting people be happy in their own way, left her in what was henceforward to be called "the nursery."

She was watching the child as it lay on Becky's knee, and asking all kinds of questions of that now great authority connected with the nursing and rearing of babies.

And Becky, feeling her importance, answered like an oracle of old, that is to say, with a curious mixture of dignity, mystery, and ignorance.

"Poor Mina," said Aunt Tabby to herself, "she is like a child with a new doll, and I'm glad of it, for it's very dull for her here now there's no Ladybird to talk to and share her occupations and amusements; no Oswald Egerton to follow her like her shadow—not even her cousin Gaspar Mountjoy to quarrel with. She was growing more thoughtful, silent, and musing than ever; and no wonder, shut up in an old country-house with nothing but elderly people, not even her cousin Mountjoy coming this Christmas! Then, too, I'm sure she misses poor Oswald—she was quite another creature when he was with us. I always


fancied he loved her, and that she knew it, and that there was no love lost between them ; but then her father's pride, and his great expectations and ambitious plans and hopes about her, made her hide away anything of the kind in her inmost heart ; for if she loves her father much, she fears him more. I'd rather, for my part, see her engaged to Oswald Egerton than to the Earl of Beaudesert—Oswald is such a fine young fellow ; and as her father's ward, they've been so intimate from childhood. But I see through it all. My brother got him that appointment abroad just to part them ; and I can't help thinking Gaspar Mountjoy had a hand in it, and put her father up to getting Oswald away. Poor Mina ! ' Still waters run deep,' and calm and cold as she seems, I suspect there's a volcano beneath the ice in her breast. How moved she was at the sight of poor Ladybird's helpless babe ! How she sobbed, and then fainted dead away. Talk of Mina being cold-hearted

after that! I believe, with all Ladybird's animation and eloquence, and fine talking, Mina has a thousand times her feeling and passion—so much the worse for her if she has."

Woodhurst was a very curious old place, combining many different styles of architecture. It had been added to by different possessors under many different reigns. Of the most ancient part of the building none, save the hall, was much used by the family.

The rooms in the old wing were low, black, and inconvenient, compared to the more airy, lofty, and spacious apartments of a recent date; and added to this, the ancient parts of the house had, of course, the reputation of being haunted. There were many historical associations connected with Woodhurst Court to give it interest in the eyes of the archæologist and even the historian.

King John had used the place as a hunting-seat, and had summoned a hasty council there



on some emergency, caused by his fraternal treachery towards the brave Richard Cœur de Lion. It was probably from this circumstance it derived the name of Woodhurst Court. In the Wars of the Roses it had been frequently taken and retaken—sometimes the White Rose floating on the banner that waved from its tower, sometimes the Red. Cavaliers and Roundheads, in the latter days of the Protectorate, had disputed the possession of this romantic old place; the latter, during the time of Cromwell and his Ironsides, driving away the staunch old cavalier, Woodhurst of Woodhurst, who, when that sad fellow, “the Merry Monarch,” was restored, returned to the house of his fathers. In the old part of the Court there were sliding panels, secret closets, trap-doors, dungeons even, and, report said, a subterranean passage, communicating with what was once a wild inlet of the sea, a quarter of a mile off, with at that time only a solitary fisherman’s hut built there, but where now a

few pretty villas, gay shops, and a bathing-machine or two formed a watering-place.

This subterranean passage, however, if it ever existed, which was doubtful, was blocked up, and even its entrance, said to have been from a dungeon at Woodhurst Court, and its egress, supposed to be at a little cave among the rocks, were quite forgotten and lost.

While Woodhurst was in the hands of the Griffin family (that is to say, from the time that our Mr. Woodhurst was twelve years of age until he was forty), the old part of the building had been shut up, just as it was, with all its faded, old furniture, empanelled pictures, and ghosts. But when Mr. Woodhurst returned a very wealthy and successful man—a merchant-prince, in short—to the home of his fathers, the old wing was then again thrown open. The dust and cobwebs of nearly thirty years were removed; the rats and mice were driven from their citadel; and the sun and air were let into those ghostly haunts.


As little girls, Mina Woodhurst and her cousin Ladybird could never be persuaded to do more than peep timidly in at what was called the "haunted chamber;" yet their cousin, Gaspar Mountjoy, and Mr. Woodhurst's ward, Oswald Egerton, used to snatch a fearful joy from rummaging about the old rooms and trying to find out that mystery of mysteries, the opening to that subterranean passage, in which the two boys and the little girls, Mina and Ladybird, devoutly believed.

In former days a chapel and a small burial-ground had adjoined a little garden at the back of the old wing; and though the burial-ground had long been disused, walled round, and was now a thicket—an impenetrable thicket of brambles and evergreens—yet its being there at all added much, in the minds of the vulgar, to the ghostly interest of the spot. No servant would ever enter this wing of Woodhurst Court alone. When scrubblings, scourings, cleanings, sweepings, and dustings,

&c., were required, the maids—the old maids of the household—would not undertake the work, except in pairs, and attended by one of the men-servants. There was one especial object of great dread—that was a room hung with faded blue damask, and called the “Blue Chamber,” in which a former master of Woodhurst had, according to tradition, been found murdered ; and whence, when lying in state, his body had been stolen, or, as report said, “spirited” away, never to be seen again on this side of eternity !

That the Woodhurst of those days was murdered was a fact, and that his body was removed in a mysterious manner was also certain ; but he was a Roman Catholic, and the Puritans, under Cromwell, were at that time triumphant. They were quartered at the village, and were about to besiege “The Court, when its master was found dead in his bed.”

That was probably the result of private



revenge ; but the stealthy removal of his body was of course to enable his friends to inter it according to Roman Catholic rites.

There was a tradition, also, that a grim portrait of this murdered man, the fine face of which had been rosy and smiling before his death, had become pale and frowning since ; and that across his bare throat there appeared a gash, and drops of blood on his point collar. There were also dark-coloured stains on the oak floor, which, it was mysteriously whispered, no scrubbing would remove ; and this was supposed to confirm the theory that this was the life-blood of a murdered man. There were many stories told to account for the murder. That most generally believed was that the Woodhurst of that day—a staunch Cavalier, and who, though deformed, owing to an accident in his childhood, was a man of singular spirit, strength, and prowess—had struck to the earth a Puritan leader who had tried to make love to Woodhurst's youngest

sister. The Puritan, it was said, hid himself behind the arras at night till Woodhurst slept, murdered the brother, and then, with the aid of his soldiers, carried off the sister. Her portrait was also in the Blue Chamber.

Of all these traditions, and above all, that of "The Ghost of the Blue Chamber," Mr. Woodhurst was very proud. "*Parvenus*," he said, "can have no family traditions, and ghosts never condescend to haunt any but old houses." His nephew, Gaspar Mountjoy, an odd, fitful, and often gloomy youth, with an intense passion for archæology, and a great delight in everything that is dear to the antiquarian, used, when at Woodhurst, to spend long summer days and even long winter nights alone, in these ghostly haunts, poring over black-letter volumes stowed away there, and parchments hoarded in old oaken chests. He was looked upon with awe when he issued forth from the Blue Chamber by all the household, including Aunt Tabby and his young cousins Mina

and Ladybird, and called, half in fun, the chosen friend and companion of "The Ghost of the Blue Chamber." When Gaspar Mountjoy was expected, with his mother, to join the family Christmas gathering at Woodhurst, the two old housemaids, backed up by the undergardener, set to work about the, to them, nervous task of cleansing and putting in order the so-called "Haunted Wing." But it seemed likely to be labour in vain, when Mrs. Mountjoy's account of her son's severe illness came to excuse his presence and hers at the annual festival.

"Gaspar's being away," said kind Aunt Tabby, "will make this Christmas a very dull one for poor Mina. Odd, wild, and eccentric as he is, he is young, and youth seeks youth. How lucky it is that baby has come to occupy and interest her mind. She is quite a new creature since she has had something to work for, care for, and think about."

CHAPTER VIII.

By pride, angels have fallen ere thy time ;
By pride, that sole alloy of thy most noble nature !

SIR E. BULWER LYTTON.

MR. WOODHURST was a very handsome man, of about sixty. He looked, as handsome people generally do, considerably younger than he was. His bright "blue eye, in which was set some spark of the Plantagenet," had not lost its fire ; his tall, upright form its shape and dignity ; nor his limbs their pliancy and strength. There were many great and noble qualities in Mr. Woodhurst ; a high sense of honour, an earnest reverence for truth, a chi-

valrous spirit (especially where women were concerned), and a generous heart, were among his best attributes.

But he was proud, ambitious, stern, unforgiving, full of this world and its vain aspirations; and though regular at church, and loud and sonorous in the responses, his heart did not echo the confession of his lips when he said, too pompously perhaps, "that he had done those things which he ought not to have done, and left undone those things he ought to have done." Nor was the inner man stirred, except with worldly pride, when the outer one knelt on the crimson velvet hassock, and he turned his eyes, not to Heaven and his Father there, but to monuments, hatchments, and memorial windows parading the Woodhurst motto and its blazoned coat of arms.

As he was still an active partner in one of our most flourishing City firms, he was obliged to be a great deal away from that

object of his pride, that, in every sense, "Paradise Regained," his ancestral home.

During his frequent absences, Mina, when her cousin Ladybird was married, was left to the guidance of her own strange, deep, passionate heart, and to the companionship of kind, simple Aunt Tabby.

Mr. Woodhurst had a town house—dear to him, because it had been the London residence of his ancestors. It was in Spring Gardens, and there Mina and Ladybird, while their education was in progress, had received the instructions of the best masters, and were placed under the care of a first-rate governess. This governess, an admirable spinster, of the name of Temple, had continued with Mina, as a friend, for a year after "her occupation was gone," and would have continued to live with her pupil, but that she was required to keep the house of an old, infirm brother, who had returned from India a wealthy bachelor.

Mr. Woodhurst was very proud of his

stately, Juno-like Mina; he loved her tenderly, and cherished the loftiest hopes for her future destiny. But as a companion, when he wished for relaxation, the merry, talkative, frolicsome Ladybird had been his great delight.

How often do we see the stern man of ambition and business turn from the sedate and sensible of the female world, to enjoy the gay smiles and merry prattle of some light-hearted, playful Euphrosyne! And thus it was with Mr. Woodhurst.

His daughter, in spite of her love and the pride she had received as a heritage from him, dreaded her father too much to be open, frank, and free with him.

It is a bad thing for both parties, father and daughter, when the former inspires, and the latter feels, the numbing, chilling influences of fear. There was no confidence, no sympathy between Mina and her father. But playful Ladybird would watch for him on his return from the City, in town, or hasten to

meet him at the station in the country ; tell him every little adventure and incident of her girlish life ; consult him about the colour of a ribbon, the shape of a bonnet, the fashion of a brooch ; expect him to sympathise in her innocent and young delight in a new dress, a visit to the theatre, a ball, a party ; and, in short, supply exactly the recreation which the mind of a business man requires, and which he never found in the beautiful, undemonstrative, and silent Mina.

Ladybird's disobedience, defiance, and desertion was, therefore, a heavy blow to his love and pride, and her place in his inner and outer life no one else could fill.

It was fortunate for Aunt Tabby's bazaar, and for the beauty and artistic effect of the Christmas decorations at Woodhurst, that they were completed before the little stranger made its singular *débüt*.

Mina's taste and skill were very great, hers were indeed "helping hands," and she loved

Aunt Tabby so dearly, that she thought nothing of any amount of labour where her plans were concerned.

Mina had contributed *chefs-d'œuvre* to the bazaar. She had superintended the decorating all the inhabited rooms with wreaths, which her own tasteful and clever fingers had formed of holly, mistletoe, and other evergreens. She had crowned with these garlands the casques of the coats of mail in the hall and the busts and statues in the other rooms. And luckily all this was done before the Christmas-eve on which the little stranger who had made such a change in her habits and feelings appeared.

Aunt Tabby had little help from Mina now. Even when she tore herself away from the "nursery," her heart was there.

On Christmas-day, although, to Mr. Woodhurst's great delight and pride, the Earl of Beaudesert walked home with the Woodhursts from church, and kept close to Mina all the

time, she no sooner reached home than she hurried away.

Mr. Woodhurst hoped, as the earl had agreed to stay to lunch, that she had repaired to her dressing-room to array herself for conquest.

He was much vexed and surprised, then, when, after she had been thrice summoned to the hall where the luncheon was spread, she appeared just as she had left them, not having even taken off her cloak or bonnet. Mina had never shown any very great anxiety about her appearance when the earl was expected ; but to please her father, and as a token of proper respect for the great man of the county, she had always made a suitable and elegant toilette.

And now that his lordship has actually condescended to stay to lunch, and that, as there is no party at the Castle, it is not improbable that he may be tempted to remain to dinner, there is Mina, in her grey cloth

dress, her bonnet, and sealskin cloak. Why, even Aunt Tabby has put on a smart cap and a silk dress. Mrs. Lackaday, who, to save trouble, always wore weeds, had roused herself to change her heavy orleans for a rich silk, while Mrs. Bussel, the only very plain one of the family, is ridiculously over-dressed, all bows and bugles, in a new green velvet, and with a gold watch and chain very conspicuous.

Mr. Woodhurst looked very angrily at his daughter, as he said—

“I thought you were changing your dress, Mina? Were you not aware that his lordship was kind enough to agree to honour us with his company?”

The earl was very good-natured, and was very much in love with Mina, all the more so, perhaps, because she, not being in love with him, and not having that reverence for rank, and that ambition which he found in most ladies, was quite herself in his presence, and

never flattered or bored him with adulatory attentions.

He saw Mina's colour come and go beneath her father's angry glance, and he was resolved, if possible, to set all right at once, so he said—

“Miss Woodhurst's beauty is quite of that kind which is ‘when unadorned, adorned the most,’ and I am sure she knows it. No dress could be more becoming than that she now wears; besides which, my dear Woodhurst, I am glad she has not changed it, as I am going to beg you to let me take a long country walk with you and the ladies on this bright frosty morning, and to invite myself, poor lonely bachelor that I am, to your Christmas dinner.”

Mina thanked the earl with eyes moistened by a tear.

To him, those large, glorious, black eyes were captivating enough, however coldly they might look at him; but that tear—whatever

remnant of aristocratic frost, prejudice, or pride might still incrust his heart—that tear melted it all away, and had they been alone, it is probable that the proud Earl of Beaude-sert would have fallen then and there on his knees before the beautiful daughter of a commoner, who, though now master of Woodhurst, had seen the day when he was the youngest, humblest, and least important of all the clerks in the great City firm of which he was now the head.

Mina said nothing to her father about the baby—the real excuse for her long delay and neglected toilet. She had a sort of instinctive conviction, that though in the excitement and enthusiasm of the moment, he had agreed to adopt the child of the unforgiven Ladybird, yet, on reflection, he was not quite pleased with himself for having done so. Certainly he never named the babe; never alluded to its existence or presence in the house; and often and often he sent peremptorily for Mina

when she was in the nursery, and contrived—(a thing he had never done before)—to interfere a great deal in the disposal of her time ; to occupy her in close attendance on himself, and to look very stern and angry if she attempted to make any excuse for leaving him, to hurry, as she was sure to do, to the nursery and the darling baby.

CHAPTER IX.

Rapt into future times, the bard begun ;
A virgin shall conceive, a virgin bear a son.
From Jessie's root behold a branch arise,
Whose sacred flower with fragrance fills the skies.
Th' æthereal spirit o'er its leaves shall move,
And on its tops descend the mystic dove.

* * * * *

Swift fly the years, and rise th' expected morn,
O spring to light !—auspicious babe be born !

POPE.

CHRISTMAS-DAY passed off very pleasantly to every one but sweet Mina, whose heart was in the nursery.

The earl—a thorough-bred English gentle-

man, though a little bit of a bore, at least in Mina's opinion—made himself singularly amiable and amusing. He was taken by Aunt Tabby into the schools, where the bazaar was almost complete; and he pointed out among the *chefs-d'œuvre* of ingenuity, industry, and taste, numerous articles of which he meant to be the purchaser.

Everything that Aunt Tabby proudly displayed as the work of her niece Mina, the earl begged to be allowed to purchase. He promised his interest to secure the attendance of the band of the regiment quartered at B——; and he promised to send a liberal supply of whatever flowers and fruit the Castle conservatories could boast.

Aunt Tabby began to like him very much, and to wish that it might be a match. Mrs. Bussel was all devotion and attention, and very anxious to keep old Bussel out of the way, lest his vulgarity should disgust his lordship with a connection that had such

plebeian drawbacks. But his lordship, in his inmost heart, infinitely preferred the honest simplicity of the retired pickle-seller to the toadyism and would-be fine-lady airs of his far more vulgar wife.

During the long walk through the new plantations and the old woods, the earl was as much bent on securing a *tête-à-tête* with Mina as she was in avoiding one. Of course the lady was the superior tactician of the two. What woman of twenty-two, not in love with a man, cannot outwit that same man (if a lover), though he be a politician, a privy councillor, and double her age? Mina contrived to keep close to Aunt Tabby, in spite of all Mr. Woodhurst's efforts to second his lordship's manoeuvres.

Mrs. Bussel took her brother's arm, and also the opportunity of pouring into his ear a good deal of the venom and jealousy with which her heart was full about Mina's devotion to Ladybird's "brat," as she spitefully

called the baby. Mr. Woodhurst was in a mood to be worked upon, and Mrs. Bussel did not spare him. The result was, that on their return from their long walk, while everyone had retired to dress for dinner, Mr. Woodhurst sent for Mina—who, of course, had hurried off to the nursery—and when she entered her father's dressing-room, the angry fire of his eyes and the flush on his pale cheek made her own colour come and go, her heart sink, and her knees tremble.

“Mina,” said her father, “I am much displeased with you, much disappointed in you.”

“Why so, papa? What have I done to offend you?” faltered Mina.

“Much,” cried Mr. Woodhurst, raising his voice. “You have taken advantage of my weakness in not sending at once to the union the child so audaciously thrust upon me by the most heartless and ungrateful of women; and not content with my allowing it the shelter of my roof, you, my only daughter,

my pride, my hope, and now my only solace and companion, neglect all your duties to me, to society, and to yourself, and sink into the servant of a child whose mother defied, deserted, and disobeyed me. You know how much I esteem and honour the Earl of Beaudesert. You know how anxious I am, by alliance with the magnates of the land, to blot out the recollection of passages in my early life which might dispose upstarts and *parvenus* to despise even a Woodhurst of Woodhurst. You know that the earl admires—you suspect that he loves you. You are well aware that to see you Countess of Beaudesert, would be to me a source of pride and joy no words can paint, and yet you suffer yourself, even on the very day when his lordship has condescended to propose to be our guest—you suffer yourself, I say, to be monopolised by that brat.”

Mina stood pale as death, tears slowly

gathering in her eyes, her lips apart, her hands clasped. She tried to speak, but a spasm in her throat choked her utterance.

“Don’t cry, girl!” said he, impatiently. “Don’t disfigure yourself just when I wish you to look your best. But mark me, I am a Woodhurst, and a Woodhurst does not lightly break his word. I said I would adopt that ungrateful woman’s wretched child, and I will do so, unless your conduct renders it an impossibility. If you continue to make yourself the laughingstock you do, by waiting on that infant, as if it were the only thing you cared for on earth, I *will* follow sister Bussel’s very sensible advice, and send it to the union.”

“The union! Oh, papa,” almost screamed Mina; “oh, unsay those cruel words;” and she sank on her knees and sobbed as if her heart would break. “Oh, father,” she added, catching his hand, as he angrily approached to raise her, “oh, unsay those words—I will

not offend you. I will—I will do all I can to please you ; but say it shall never go to the union !”

“That depends on you, girl !” cried Mr. Woodhurst, rending his hand from her grasp. “Behave as becomes my daughter and the heiress of Woodhurst. Show that ingrate’s child no more attention than humanity exacts. Endeavour to realize the great hope and ambition of my life, and the child of one whose treachery to me seems only to make her the dearer to you may remain here. Defy, deceive, and thwart me, and it goes to ‘the union !’ And now rise and go to your toilet, and dress yourself as becomes the heiress of Woodhurst when the Earl of Beaudesert is her father’s guest. Rise ! do you not hear me ?” he cried, as, glancing from his window, he saw the earl, (who had rapidly changed his dress, his valet and things having been sent for from the Castle.) “By Heaven ! there is the Beaudesert dressed, and walking alone in

the pleasance," he said. "I must hasten to his lordship. REMEMBER!"

He hurried out as he spoke, leaving Mina on her knees, a breathing statue of Despair.

CHAPTER X.

Her perfect form was all,
Painters and poets dream,
And fain would trace;
Where harmony did so the soul enthrall
That nought seemed loveliest, in form or face—
'Twas blended beauty!

THE bazaar had been brilliantly attended: the band had given life to the scene. His lordship set the fashion to all his imitators, of purchasing liberally. The profits exceeded Aunt Tabby's most sanguine expectations. Kind, good Aunt Tabby! she was in raptures.

His lordship was very popular now with Aunt Tabby. He had organised raffles,

lotteries, auctions. He had spared no trouble, no expense. He was Aunt Tabby's counsellor and *factotum*, and, of course, all for love of that statuesque beauty of the black eyes and raven hair, Mina.

Mina, with the dread of the union before her eyes for the child she idolised, had abstained from the great solace and delight of her life—her constant visits to the nursery. She had dressed herself in her newest silks and oldest laces, and adorned her beauty with gems. She had tried to talk and smile in the presence of the earl. And then came a breathing space.

The earl had a shooting party at the Castle. It was composed of gentlemen alone.

The earl was a bachelor, and the Lady Aurelia Mandeville, his sister, who generally did the honours of Beaudesert Castle when he had company, being confined to her bed with illness at home, could not be present at Beaudesert this Christmas.

It was an inexpressible relief to Mina (alas ! that it should be so) to hear that her father was going for a week to Beaudesert Castle, and that business compelled Mrs. Bussel to spend that time in town.

They are gone, and she is free !

But on her first visit to the nursery after her father's and her Aunt Bussel's departure, Mina saw, with unspeakable anxiety and distress, that in the short time during which she had been able to pay it only hurried, momentary visits, the child had grown palpably thin, and that it looked ill.

"It's always so when they're brought up by hand, miss," said old Becky, "it's agin' nature, and there aint one in a thousand has the constitootion to stand it."

Mina took the poor little thing on her lap. Oh, how light it felt—how wasted it looked.

"What can be done, Becky?" she gasped out.

"There aint no help for it, miss, but a wet-

nurse. 'Twont live at this rate. I've been thinking: Phoebe Mayflower, you know, miss, our under-gardener's wife, she've lost her'n. It died yesterday. Well, if she could have this blessed babe to nurse, what a comfort to both parties. She'd leave off fretting about her babe, and you'd soon see this dear little poppet get quite fat."

As she spoke the child stiffened, its eyes were fixed, its little tongue protruded—its face grew purple—it was in a convulsion!

Mina's terror was dreadful to witness. She did not scream, but she grew ghastly white, and her heart ceased to beat.

"Hold the babe, miss, while I gets the bath ready," said Becky. "It'll come to. It's had two or three of them fits."

Two or three, and Mina not even apprised of it or sent for!

"It's my opinion it ought to be *half-baptised*, miss. If it wor took ailing, it'd be a sin and a shame to think it hadn't been even named."

Mina started. She had never thought of that. She helped Becky to undress the child and put it in a warm bath. Almost immediately it was immersed, the rigidity left its limbs, the purple hue faded from its little face—it looked almost itself again.

When it was once more asleep in its bassinette, Mina had a conference with kind Aunt Tabby, the result of which was that the curate of Woodhurst should be sent for at once to baptise the child *privately*, not “half,” as Becky and all like her imagine, and that Mrs. Mayflower, the under-gardener’s wife, should be asked to let the little one at the Court supply the place of that whom death had so suddenly claimed at the cottage.

In two hours from that time the little babe had been enrolled as “*a Soldier of Christ, manfully to fight under His banner, against the world, the flesh, and the devil,*” and in the presence of Aunt Tabby and Mrs. Lackaday, Mina, and old Becky, had been signed with

the sign of the Cross, and enlisted in the band of Christians under the name of MARY.

The next hour found Mary—Our Mary—nestling in the full bosom of the under-gardener's wife, in her snug cottage-home, supplying to the bereaved mother the babe she had lost, and drinking in life and health as she lay cradled in those kind, motherly arms. Our Mary had no more fits; on every visit that Mina paid she found her little *protégée* looking fatter, brighter, and healthier. Phoebe Mayflower, her foster-mother, loved the babe as if it had been her own, and all went happily on till the morning after Mr. Woodhurst's return from Beaudesert Castle and Mrs. Bussel's arrival from London.

On that morning our party were assembled at breakfast, and Mr. Woodhurst had just opened the letter-bag. He distributed the missives according to their directions, when one addressed to himself in a strange hand caught his eye. As he read it, an exclamation

which burst from his lips made all raise their eyes from their letters to look at him. He was very red, and his face so discomposed, that Mina, very pale, rushed to him, and Aunt Tabby hastened to his side.

“What is it, papa? What is it, brother?” they exclaimed.

“It is a letter from some person, a monthly nurse, I suppose, in attendance on Ladybird—Mrs. Morris, I mean—saying that she was delivered yesterday of a fine boy, but is in want of the common necessities of life; that her husband had been obliged to leave her for a curacy in a milder climate, and that unless I assist her, both her child and herself must perish! In addition to this is a line from the unhappy creature herself.

“UNCLE!—Forgive and forget the past. Do not let me and my new-born child perish. Pardon your poor, penitent

“LADYBIRD.”

“Of course we must send her help imme-

diately," said Mr. Woodhurst. "I think, sister, I shall go to town at once to visit and relieve her."

"Shall I accompany you, dear brother?" asked Aunt Tabby; "she might be glad to see me."

"Yes; let us set off at once."

"And what base-born brat, then," cried the shrill Mrs. Bussel, "is that you have sheltered? Now, brother, of course you will have no scruple—now you will send it at once to the union."

"We will talk about that when I return," said Mr. Woodhurst. "I hear it is at Mayflower's cottage; there let it be for the present."

"Poor thing!" said Aunt Tabby, "it is innocent, however guilty its wicked mother may be."

"Don't weep, Mina," said Mr. Woodhurst, "Ladybird shall have every comfort!"

Still Mina wept on, while Mrs. Bussel asked again and again—

“Who can be the mother of that brat?—
what objection can my brother have now to
send it to the union?—there is now no doubt
what it is!”

Alas for Our Mary!

CHAPTER XI.

Is there in human form that bears a heart
A wretch, a villain lost to love and truth,
That can with studied, sly ensnaring,
Betray sweet Jenny's unsuspecting youth?

BURNS.

WHILE Aunt 'Tabby and Mr. Woodhurst were discussing the necessity of immediately hastening to poor Ladybird's relief and assistance, Mina had glided from the room. She was deadly pale, though very still; outwardly calm, though inwardly terribly agitated.

She longed to be alone. She felt she must weep, for her very heart was full of tears, but yet she would not go till she had seen Mrs.

Bussel hurry away, her face sharpened by spite, to communicate to all the servants the discovery just made, that *the brat*, as she delighted to call Our Mary, was after all neither kith nor kin to Mr. Woodhurst, and that she hoped and believed that it would ultimately be packed off to the union, where, she added (if she had been listened to), it would have been sent at once.

After Mina and Mrs. Bussel had left the breakfast-table, and Mrs. Lackaday was gone to her accustomed seat in the morning-room, to stare at the hungry robins and wonder what would become of them, Miss Tabby said—

“If we make haste, brother, we shall be in time for the 9 30 train, and be in London by three ; but don’t you think poor Mina would like to go with us—she who so dotes on Lady-bird, that ever since the baby she thought hers has been here, she has cared for nothing else? I thought she looked very sad and

mortified that you did not tell her to get ready to go with us."

"I have my reasons, Tabby," said Mr. Woodhurst, sternly, "for wishing Mina to remain here. I expect that the earl will call here to-day or to-morrow, and I am very anxious Mina should be at home to receive him. But our good sisters Bussel and Lackaday are, I own, not exactly the chaperons I should have chosen to help Mina to do the honours of Woodhurst to his lordship in my absence; still they are her aunts, and they are married women, and insure by their presence all that propriety exacts in such a case. I could wish they were a little more dignified, lady-like, and reserved—a little more like you, dear Tabby; but I have had a long confidential talk with the earl about my early days. He knows how we were all left at my father's death, and understands how my two eldest sisters came to marry even a pickle-seller and a master undertaker for a home.

He told me he sympathised with the true pride that made me show them as much respect as if they were peeresses, for, added his lordship, after all, they have the old Woodhurst blood in their veins, and, luckily, have no offspring. And then he told me Lord Lofty has a cousin, not very far removed, who is a blacksmith, and another a beadle. He added that all great families have poor relations in the lowest walks of life, and advised me to get Sir Bernard Burke's 'Vicissitudes of Noble Families' to confirm his statement. He says, that a pickle-seller and a master undertaker are quite nobs compared to some of the kith and kin of our dukes and marquises. He was so pleasant about it, and is writing an article in a magazine on the 'Fusion of the Classes.' He won't mind our sisters at all, and I shall give them a hint to leave Mina and his lordship alone for half an hour; for oh, Tabby! I have every reason to believe Lord

Beaudesert means to propose to my daughter!"

"Well," said kind, simple Aunt Tabby, "I hope, if so, she'll accept him; for when he spent Christmas-day here, I thought him a very nice, good-natured, kind-hearted, conversable man."

"*Man!*" cried Mr. Woodhurst, "he's an *Earl!* he's one of the most ancient of our nobility! he's connected with all the noblest families in the country. His estates are, as I know now, a little encumbered, for he has told me everything about them. The fortune I shall give Mina will pay off the mortgage. Accept him, indeed! Why, if she even hesitated, I should be so infuriated I should be ready to turn her out of doors, and cut her off with a shilling. Accept a peer of the realm, and such a man, too! Why, there is not a duke's daughter who wouldn't jump at him!"

Aunt Tabby had her own fears and doubts about Mina's accepting him, but she prudently kept them to herself.

“A still tongue makes a wise head,” she said to herself, as she hastily put up her knitting (Aunt Tabby was always knitting); and she was leaving the room to pack up a few necessities for her brother and herself, when he said—

“Tell Mina from me, that I shall do all I can for her poor Ladybird, and make arrangements for her coming down here as soon as it is safe to move her. I am very glad she did not force her child upon me in that bold, determined, yet crafty manner. When I return, we must set on foot every possible inquiry as to its real parentage. Have you any suspicion, Tabby?”

“Nothing to speak of,” said Aunt Tabby, hurrying off.

Now, Aunt Tabby being able, as she said, to put two and two together, directly the child proved not to be Ladybird’s, had thought of a young workwoman, pretty and dressy, to whom both herself and Mina had

been very partial, but whom she had ceased to employ because she was too fond of chattering with Mr. Gaspar Mountjoy, Mina's cousin, and young Mr. Oswald Egerton ; and over their early tea, the old spinsters of the household, down to Becky, had been in the habit of prophesying that no good could come of Flora Flitter's flowers, followers, and flighty ways.

This handsome young seamstress had been also a great favourite with Ladybird, and at one time was very often at "The Court," helping Mina and her cousin with their works of fancy and charity. She had but one defect, for her face and form were very beautiful ; this one defect was in her right foot, which was slightly deformed, and this caused her to wear a very peculiar shoe, and to walk rather lame.

Now it *had* reached Miss Tabby's ears that some of the out-door men had said that the footprints across the pleasance to the entrance

of the wood, (and which, much confused and trodden down, could yet be seen directly under the window at which the bassinette had been put on the morning of Christmas-eve,) were exactly like those which they had been familiar with twelvemonths before, when Flora Flitter used to walk over from the village to wait on the young ladies.

It had struck Miss Tabby, and, indeed, all of the household who knew of this discovery, that in all probability Ladybird had deputed this girl, as a person not wanting for courage and cleverness, and well acquainted with the Court, to convey the child into the house in its bassinette; and as Flora was no favourite of Mr. Woodhurst's, it was thought best to say nothing about this matter, as it might add to his displeasure against Ladybird, who was very much beloved at Woodhurst Court. But now a new light was let in on Aunt Tabby's simple mind. What if the child were Flora's own! The girl was vain, flighty, much ad-

mired by gentlemen. The longer Aunt Tabby thought upon it, the more likely it appeared to be a case of seduction and desertion perhaps. Why, it had been whispered to Aunt Tabby two years before, that Gaspar Mountjoy had been seen by a woodman talking to Flora in the "Haunted Wood," and he was suspected of being the donor of a gay brooch and a pair of coral ear-rings which Flora had appeared in, and which had set all the female tongues at Woodhurst wagging about her.

Miss Tabby, however, had no time to think any more about Flora and her follies and misfortunes. Mr. Woodhurst was calling aloud for her to make haste, or they should be too late. Mina rushed down-stairs to say good-bye to them, and to send her fond love to Ladybird, before they set off in the pony-chaise for the station.

Mr. Woodhurst embraced her kindly.

"You look ill, darling," he said; "these

shocks and surprises are too much for you. Go and lie down for a few hours, and then take a walk to freshen those pale cheeks ; but don't go beyond the park, my love, for I think the earl may call to-day. I should like you to have on your new black velvet dress, and that old point-lace collar and the sleeves he admired so much. Do your hair, my sweet Mina, in the way he praised, in those rolled bands, I don't know what you call 'em, but they look like a turban ; and be very charming, my child ! Ah, Mina ! you little rogue, you don't half know—and yet, perhaps, you do—how much Lord Beaudesert admires you. He has a statuette on his writing-table, a Madonna in his dressing-room, and a Juno in his gallery, all bought, solely because they are like my Mina. And his scrap-book is full of 'attempts'—he calls them vain ones—to sketch this pale, saucy face !”

Mina blushed as her father, with another

long embrace, handed Aunt Tabby into the pony-chaise, and calling out, "You shall soon have your friend Ladybird back, my own love," drove gaily away.

CHAPTER XII.

His wee bit ingle blinkin' bonnily,
His clean hearth-stane, his thrifty wife's smile.

BURNS.

MINA watched the pony-chaise until a turning in the road hid it from her view, and then she took her garden hat and cloak from the peg on which they hung in the entrance-hall, and, forgetful of the earl and all her father's ambitious hopes and prospects, she tripped lightly over the frozen sward, until she came to Phœbe Mayflower's cottage.

Phœbe was a true daughter of the people
She made very light of past pains and perils,

and was not like a fine lady dwelling for a month on nothing else, and never stirring from her silken sofa. Phœbe was already up and about, and when Mina entered the neat little cottage, she found her looking rather pale and delicate certainly, but very pretty for all that.

The hearth was nicely swept, the place tidied up—the baby washed, dressed, and asleep in its cradle—not the gay bassinette, all pink silk and white lace, but the old yellow wicker cradle which Phœbe's mother had sent her, and in which Phœbe and six brothers and sisters had been rocked and reared. Phœbe was making a beef-steak pudding for her husband's dinner, and Mina would not let her leave it till it was in the pot. In the meantime Mina turned to the picturesque old cradle, and gazed long and tearfully at the sleeping infant within.

"Don't it thrive, miss? and it's for all the world like wax-work," said Phœbe Mayflower, as she popped the pudding into the pot. "I

fancies I can see it grow, I do. But lawk a-daisy, miss, be it all true what my measter said when he looked in just now?—Says he, ‘Ah, ah, ’taint Miss Ladybird’s child, after all, for Mrs. Bussel have just been into the kitchen to tell us that Miss Ladybird, or rather Mrs. Morris, was only confined two days ago; and Miss Tabby and our master’s a-going up to town directly to see her; and Mrs. Bussel says most loike the baby’ll have to go to the union after all.’ But I ups and I says to my John, there’s two sides to that bargain, my lad—rather than part with it now, and let it go where it might be ill-used and half-starved, I’d work and drudge to keep it myself, and I knows Miss Mina will take care we’re no losers, for she’s as fond as ever—fond of it.”

“You are a good, kind-hearted creature, Phoebe,” said Mina, taking out her purse; “it is no fault of the poor little infant’s that its mother is *not* my cousin Ladybird. But whatever unfortunate and miserable creature

has given birth to it, it is innocent, and has a claim on the pity of every human being. I grew very fond of it while it was at our house. You, I dare say, love it by this time as if it were your own, Phœbe. You must do so, for you have saved its life."

"Ah! you may well say that, miss. It was a mite of a thing when it was first put into bed to me; as cold as a stone, and so weak, it had scarcely strength to suck; and now look at it, as fat as a little pig, and always *a-seeking*."

As she spoke, it awoke, opened those large, blue, wondering eyes which Mina had so often admired before, and in a moment was proving the truth of Phœbe's words, and nestling in her bosom.

Mina waited till it had again dropped off to sleep, and then she held it in her arms while Phœbe arranged the cradle; and very fond and very soft was the kiss Mina pressed on its fair, open brow and silken eyelids, and very sad the tears that fell from Mina's long

lashes into its little breast. When Phœbe had replaced it in its cradle, and very unnecessarily rocked it and sung to it a wild, sweet, rustic lullaby, Mina said—

“Phœbe, I know you have a good heart and a high spirit. I cannot bear the thought of that babe’s going to the union.”

“Nor can I, miss. It ’ud well nigh be my death.”

“Well, then, Phœbe,” said Mina, “if I give you enough money to prevent its being any expense to you to rear it, *can you promise me it shall not go to the union?*”

“That I can, miss.”

“But remember, Phœbe, you have a husband.”

“Yes, miss, that’s true enough.”

“And can you promise to keep the poor little thing without first consulting him?”

“Lawk a-daisy, yes, miss. He’s a very good husband as men goes, but he’s just like all the others ; he’ll domineer, and storm, and

kick up a dust, and be a Turk and a tyrant, if a woman's fool enough to let him. He've never offered to strike me—no, nor not so much as to rise his hand agin me, but I know he knocked his first wife about a good 'un, only because she was a poor, timid, weak-spereted creetur, without a will of her own. Now, I, miss, begun as I means to go on. 'I said,' says I, 'John, men has their rights—women has their'n! I'm missus in-doors; you're measter out-door. Bring me all your money, and I'll see to all your comforts and wants. Don't go to the public; if you're dry, come home, and if you wants a pint I'll fetch it for ye. Never ask me what I'm going to do, and you'll find I'm always about some good for you. As long as your home's tidy, your hearth bright, your fire burning, your pot biling, your linen clean and mended, your bed made to your liking, and your wife smart and smiling, don't you meddle or make—ax me no questions, and I'll tell ye no lies. And

if there is a bit o' money over to lay up agin a rainy day, why, what's yours is mine, and what's mine's my own ! ”

“ Capital,” said Mina, “ and does he agree ? ”

“ I never axed him, miss, but he's as happy as the day is long, and we never has a word. I never disobeys he, 'cos why, I never axes his leaf about nothink. Women was made to reflect and make up their minds, miss, but men never has no time to think, and not very good heads for thinking when they has. So all about baby is *in-door* matter, where it's understood I'm missus ; and whatever I tells him I've made up my mind to, he'll agree to ; and onst he hears me say, Miss Minar as I has resolved baby shan't go to the union, he'll be as good as any half-dozen others on our side, miss.”

“ Well, then,” said Mina, giving Phœbe a five-pound note, “ if my father should call on you, or send to say that he will *not* pay for the child's nursing here, as was agreed when it

was sent to you, because he has found out it is an imposition and a trick, but that it *must* go to the union, what will you reply ?”

“ I shall say, miss, that I don’t want no money from the Squire, and shall never trouble him for none ; and that I and my measter are growed fond of baby, and should feel very lone and dull without her, and that we will bring her up as if she was our own. A daughter is always a blessing, if she turns out well, in every home, miss. It may be *Our* Mary, as we calls her already, will be all we shall have to comfort us in our old age. Bless her ! don’t she look like wax-work, miss ?”

“ Much more beautiful than any wax-work,” said Mina, kissing the little rosy hand that grasped the patchwork quilt, and hurrying home again.

She met Mrs. Bussel in the avenue coming in search of her.

“ Guess, Mina !” cried Aunt Bussel, “ who has sent a beautiful present of game, hot-house

grapes, and flowers, and a message saying he'll have the honour of calling at one o'clock."

"Lord Beaudesert, I suppose," said Mina, coldly.

"You are right, love," said Mrs. Bussel; "and your papa, who told me he thought it very likely his lordship *would* call to-day or to-morrow, begged me to remind you to wear your new black velvet; he wished us all to be very smart, and to receive his lordship in the best drawing-room. I don't think he much wanted your Aunt Lackaday to appear, as she will say such stupid things, and talk of that dreadful old undertaker Lackaday, as if the sayings and doings of such people could interest an earl! But sister Lackaday's very contrary, always was, and though, if one wanted her to dress, she'd think it a sad trouble, just because she is not wanted, she's off to her room, and will be ready, I dare say, by the time the earl comes."

"Oh, I wish he were not coming at all,"


said Mina; "it's such a very fine day, I should much rather go and take a long walk in the woods—I'm very fond of winter scenery."

"Well, darling, you can do that too. I think I know who'll be very proud to accompany you. And Aunt Lackaday and I, if we do go with you, just for appearance's sake, we'll take care to keep a good way behind—quite out of ear-shot."

"I don't wish you to do anything of the kind, aunt," said Mina. "I have nothing to say to the earl that all the world may not hear."

"Of course not, my love," said Mrs. Bussel, "in due time, but just now we must go in and get ready. I dare say his lordship expects to stay to lunch; and as Aunt Tabby is not here, I must go and give the necessary orders, for your Aunt Lackaday is of no more use than a babe."

They had turned round on their way home.



Mina was very silent and thoughtful, and paid little attention to Aunt Bussel's discussion about what should be prepared for his lordship's luncheon, and how Aunt Lackaday could be induced to put a hand to anything and make herself in any way at all useful. Mina, to escape from Mrs. Bussel, hurried into her dressing-room, but not as Mrs. Bussel imagined, all eagerness to commence a captivating toilet. No, Mina threw herself into an easy-chair by a blazing fire, and sat, plunged in deep thought, gazing into the red-hot masses of coal and wood—her hands clasped, her cheeks pale, her lips apart, and tears slowly gathering in her large, dark eyes. Her beautiful bosom heaved as if oppressed with a load of secret sorrow. And it was not till the clock on her mantelpiece struck half-past twelve, that Mina remembered the expected visit of the earl. Then she sprang from her seat, and rang her bell for her maid.

“Make haste, Nancy,” she cried. “I have

only half an hour to dress in. Quick, take off my things ; give me my wrapper. Arrange my hair in turban bands, and put out my new black velvet dress with the point-lace collar and sleeves."

Nancy, quick and handy, rapidly executed these orders ; and by the time the echo of the hoofs of his lordship's horse fell on Mina's ear, she was ready to receive him, and yet he was ten minutes before his time. But your true lover's watch always gains !

CHAPTER XIII.

Oh, but love is blind ; and I
Loved her blindly, blindly. Well,
Who that e'er loved trustfully
Such strange danger could foretel !

OWEN MEREDITH.

THE Earl of Beaudesert was about eight and thirty. He had the aquiline features almost universal among those of our aristocracy who are of pure Norman descent. His large, light blue eye was generally cold and still, but it could fire and sparkle with sudden anger, and soften with tenderness when it gazed on Mina. There was nothing very remarkable in his form or face, but he was,

though a little stiff and haughty at first, affable and obliging on an intimate acquaintance. His light hair was growing a little thin on the crown of his head, revealing a well-developed organ of self-esteem, and one, in proportion, larger still of benevolence. He was well read, naturally clever, had a little dry humour of his own, and a power of loving with passion, which was undreamt of, even by himself, until he first met the large, glorious black eyes of Mina Woodhurst.

The earl was his own master. The Woodhursts, centuries before, had intermarried with the noble family of Beaudesert. Woodhurst of Woodhurst could give his only child a large fortune, and Beaudesert wanted ready money ; but he could have commanded a fortune much larger than Mina's in his own rank of life ; and, therefore, it was love—true, fond, passionate love—without any alloy, which made him resolve to lay his coronet and himself at Mina's feet.

When the ladies were assembled in the best drawing-room, the earl was announced.

Mrs. Lackaday was in an ample black silk dress, made out of scarves and hatbands, of which the lamented Mr. Lackaday had left a large stock. Mrs. Bussel was in scarlet merino, with bright yellow ribbons in her cap. Mina was queen-like in her black Genoa velvet, coming up to her fair, round throat, and with her splendid black hair rolled in thick coils round her graceful head. Her cheek was a little flushed with the haste she had made and with the fever of her spirit.

Lord Beaudesert looked very rosy, bright, and good-humoured. His light whiskers curled crisply; his handsome mouth wore a pleasant smile which showed his very fine teeth; and his dress was as gay a morning costume as the dull fashion of the age would allow. He talked gaily with Mrs. Bussel about the Present, its politics, its pleasures, and its people. He condoled with Mrs. Lackaday about the

Past—and her “dear departed;” but all the while his light blue eyes followed every movement of Mina’s, and tried, but in vain, to meet her dark and pensive glance.

When luncheon was announced the earl offered his arm to Mina; and that repast over, he proposed a walk.

The ladies hastened to array themselves for a long country ramble, and the earl walked impatiently up and down the hall awaiting them, hoping that the first to appear would be Mina. He heard a step—he caught the sound of the rustle of a dress; he turned eagerly round. Fah! It was that long-faced, long-winded Mrs. Lackaday; then came Mrs. Bussel, her clothes all trussed up for a walk in the woods, and appearing, in her little, brownish-grey shawl and red stockings, like a French partridge; while Mrs. Lackaday stalked by her side, looking like a raven, and croaking like one, too.

The earl, with an English nobleman’s horror

of being bored, and determination not to be so, offered his arm to Mina in so polite, yet resolute a manner, that she could not well decline it.

“Shall we lead the way?” he said, walking briskly on, in the hope that the dismal, staid, old Lackaday would soon be distanced, and that little, active Mrs. Bustle would be obliged to keep her company.

The winter sun was shining very brightly as Mina and the earl walked rapidly across the park and entered the woods. Mina looked round for her aunts. They were far behind. Mrs. Lackaday had lost one of her goloshes in the grass, and they were looking for it.

“I hope you are well shod, Miss Woodhurst,” said the earl. “It will be very damp in the woods.”

“Oh, yes,” said Mina, “I have goloshes on ; but I think I must go back and see what is the matter with Aunt Lackaday. She is sitting down under a tree, looking so helpless!

Oh, I see, she has dropped one of her goloshes ! Aunt Bussel has found it, and now they are coming on. Let us wait for them, my lord."

"No, no, we may wait till dusk, for I see Mrs. Lackaday's golosh is off again ! Your father told me to be on the look-out for snipes in this wood. He said he had not been near the dark pond this winter, but that generally it is a famous resort of snipes. He told me to ask you to be my guide to it. Will you do me that favour ?"

"It is a great way off," said Mina ; "quite in the middle of the wood."

"Never mind," said his lordship, "the sun is shining so pleasantly through the leafless trees, and the rooks are cawing so charmingly to my ear, and the frosty air is so bracing, and I feel so happy, I shall enjoy a long walk."

"I wish I could see my aunts !" said Mina.

"Why so ? Are you afraid to trust yourself with me, Miss Woodhurst ?" inquired the earl, smiling gaily.

“Afraid! Oh, no, why should I be afraid?” said Mina, unwilling that Beaudesert should imagine that she attached enough importance to a *tête-à-tête* with him to fear it, and she walked on with a heightened colour.

The windings of the wood by this time have completely concealed every glimpse of Aunt Bussel’s red stockings and Aunt Lackaday’s black train. They have, indeed, purposely lingered behind. There is a great deal of snow, yet unmelted, lying in patches about, as Mina and Beaudesert make their way towards the dark pond.

Before they reach it, they find themselves in a little, bright, sunny amphitheatre of ever-greens, carpeted with fallen leaves, that emit a fragrant odour. There is a low seat at this spot, and Lord Beaudesert handed Mina to it, and then placed himself by her side. The sun shone full on her lovely face, never seen to greater advantage than in her brown garden hat. She blushed in spite of herself, for she

felt the earl's ardent gaze was fixed upon her. "There is the dark pond!" she said. "Let us hasten to it, and when you have seen all there is to be seen there, I think we had better get back as fast as we can to learn what has become of Aunt Lackaday and Aunt Bussel."

"Oh, they are quite safe, I doubt not," said Lord Beaudesert, "and I think, kind souls as they are! they have lagged behind out of pity for me."

"Pity for you, my lord?" said Mina, raising her eyes to his, and then growing crimson at the meaning she perceived in his looks and words.

"Yes, for me. They know, your father knows, you know, Mina, that I love, that I worship, that I idolise you. From the first moment, when, on my return from abroad, and my accession to the title, I beheld your beautiful face, Mina, I felt that I loved you. That love was a giant at its birth, and it has been growing ever since; judge, then, what

it is now. Every time I see you I discover some new beauty of form, face, heart, and mind. Your father, I know, would approve of your choice should it fall upon me, and I—I—oh, Mina!" and the proud earl sank on his knees in the withered leaves before her, "I will devote my life to your happiness, and think I have won the rose of the world, if you will be mine. Speak, sweet Mina! I do not expect that at first, your young, maiden heart should understand or respond to the passionate love of mine. I know I am not formed to win such love as beauty like Mina Woodhurst's must inspire. No, I only ask you to say you will try to love me—that you will let me do my best to win you. I do not ask for a certainty, I only ask for hope."

"And that hope, my lord," at length slowly gasped forth Mina, "I cannot give you."

"Mina? you do not, cannot mean it!" cried the earl, in accents of despair.

"Alas! my lord," said Mina, "I appreciate

your noble and disinterested choice of one so little worthy of you. I know how proud and enchanted my poor father would be to give me to you, and I must beg you, in mercy to a miserable girl, not to let him know that I have declined that alliance which he so courts. But, my lord, the heart you would seek to win has long been devoted to another. You see before you, my lord, the wretched victim of secret, unhappy, yet adoring love! Your noble candour, your generous offer, make me feel that you deserve that I should tell you why one so good and great cannot win a humble creature like me. I will not take refuge in any paltry subterfuge, when you have acted with such generous confidence; but, in telling you my fatal secret, my lord, I must throw myself on your mercy. If my father knew what I have just revealed to you, the result might be fatal to both him and me. Will you promise not to betray what I have told you, Lord Beaudesert? Him I love is

far away, and if my father withdraws his tenderness, as he would do if he knew that the dearest wish and wildest ambition of his heart might have been realised but for my unhappy devotion to one whom he scorns—one whom he has sent far, far away across the broad Atlantic, merely to separate us—oh, if he knew this, my lord, he would make my life miserable and my home wretched !

“ Oh, my lord,” cried Mina (in her turn kneeling at the feet of the earl, who had risen and was standing leaning against a tree at a little distance, his arms folded, his cheeks pale, his eyes fixed mournfully on her upraised face), “ Oh, my lord ! it cannot matter to you even if my father should think that he had overrated the interest you seemed to take in me ; but say even that he fancies you have changed your mind, that you have discovered faults, blemishes, imperfections in his poor Mina—that you are a little fickle, what then ! It cannot affect you, my lord, but oh, it would

be destruction to me were he to know that I might have been the Countess of Beaudesert, and had refused so great an honour."

"Mina, dear, noble, candid Mina," said the earl, "I thank you for your truth—I honour you for your constancy. Many girls would have given me their hands, though their hearts could never be mine; and the misery of that discovery, made when too late, would be greater to me than the disappointment and anguish I feel now. Well did the poets of old, Mina, make the Queen of Love and Beauty one. And I could more easily content myself with love without beauty than with beauty without love! I will take care not to increase the trouble and perplexities that I see lie heavy on your young heart, by any betrayal to your father of what has passed between us. Let him think me fickle, vacillating, incapable of earnest purpose or true love, if he will. You will know that he wrongs me. I will not intrude myself into

your confidence, nor ask who and what is the enviable being who is to wear the jewel of the world ; but this I will say, if I can in any way advance him, command me. If you ever need a friend, let Beaudesert be that friend ; if you are in trouble of any kind, apply to me. I shall probably go abroad for a time, for the wound in my heart is deeper than you perhaps imagine ; but wherever I am, you can get my address at the Castle, and a line will bring me to your side. And now let us go to the brink of the dark pond, that I may tell your father that I *did* look out for the snipes."

He held out his hand, Mina gave him hers, and they made their way to the edge of the pool.

A gradual thaw had been for some days at work melting the ice and frozen snow, and as Lord Beaudesert and Mina pushed aside the leafless boughs, and gazed on the dark, half-frozen surface, both at the same moment uttered a cry of horror, for both perceived the

feet and part of the crimson skirt of a female figure floating from under the ice. As they gazed, pale, cold with horror, and their eyes distended, the feet came floating towards them, driven by the moving of a piece of ice, as the snow melted it from the bank. The body was almost within reach of his lordship. He had in his hand a walking-stick, with an ivory hook as a handle; with this he drew the corpse to the edge of the pond, and then he lifted it on to the ground.

Mina shrieked aloud, "FLORA FLITTER!" and sank in a dead swoon by her side, and his lordship perceived that it was the body of a fine young woman about twenty, and that, though the state of the clothes showed that it had been long in the water, it was not at all decomposed or discoloured, owing to the hard frost.

At this critical moment, when he stood, not knowing what to do, between the dead woman and her who seemed scarcely less lifeless, he perceived Mrs. Bussel making her way to-

wards the pond. When she came within hearing he told her of the terrible discovery he had made, and urged her to send some of the men to carry the body to some place, where an inquest could be held. Luckily there were some labouring men at work not far off: they were soon on the spot. The remains were conveyed to the nearest public-house, the "Woodhurst Arms." And the earl, tenderly lifting Mina's slender form, carried her through the wood to the entrance of the park. There he placed her on a seat, and Mrs. Bussel and Mrs. Lackaday coming up with salts and eau-de-cologne, she was soon sufficiently revived to walk home with his lordship's help. Lord Beaudesert then took his leave, and early the next day he left the Castle and repaired to the Continent; so that when the Coroner sent to subpoena his lordship, as a principal witness, at the inquest on the body of the woman whom he had taken out of the dark pond, he was not to be found.

When Mr. Woodhurst returned, having left Aunt Tabby with poor Ladybird, who was very ill indeed, he found Mina in bed, delirious, and in a high fever; the earl gone no one knew whither; and the dead body of a woman, found in his pond, awaiting an inquest!

The result of the investigation when the Coroner's Inquest sat upon the body was that the deceased was Flora Flitter, an orphan; that she was at the time of her death a nursing mother; that several articles belonging to a baby were found in her pockets; that in all probability, after depositing her infant in the hall of "The Court" on a very dark morning, she lost her way in trying to take a short cut to the village through the wood, and not seeing the pond, stepped on to the ice, which gave way; that she had fallen under it, was soon frozen over, and not released until the thaw came on!

The jury returned a verdict to the effect that "The deceased had lost her way, in the

dark wood, on the morning of Christmas-eve, and was accidentally drowned." And no doubt after this existed on the minds of any of the inhabitants of Woodhurst that the unhappy creature had been deserted, and that, knowing the great kindness of Aunt Tabby and Miss Mina, and perhaps reckoning on the possibility of its being attributed to Ladybird, she had placed her baby where it had been found on the morning of Christmas-eve.

CHAPTER XIV.

Gone from her cheek is its summer bloom,
And her lip has lost all its sweet perfume ;
And the gloss has dropped from her raven hair,
And her cheek is pale, but no longer fair.

BARRY CORNWALL.

THE only person who expressed no opinion upon this subject was Mina, who for a long time remained in a very precarious state, confined to her room, and even to her bed, in a low, nervous fever. The doctors strictly prohibited any allusion to any agitating topic ; and everything connected with Flora and the little babe was so agitating to poor Mina, that

even Mrs. Bussel was not allowed to urge the propriety of sending the child to the union in Mina's sick room. She had, however, so far prevailed with her brother, Mr. Woodhurst, that he consented to her entreaty that she should call at the under-gardener's cottage, and propose to the Mayflowers to give the baby up to the parish officers, with whom she generously offered to communicate on the subject herself.

But Phoebe was true to her promise. She refused to part with Our Mary. Her husband coming in, backed her up manfully, and Mrs. Bussel retired, quite defeated, to consider whether Mr. Woodhurst could not be induced to endeavour to enforce submission on the part of his under-gardener and that obstinate, self-willed young baggage, his wife.

Mr. Woodhurst, however, refused to give himself any further trouble about it.


Mrs. Bussel and her husband had to return home to Camberwell, and the little babe, Our

Mary, remained with its kind foster-mother, and grew in beauty, strength, and health.

Ladybird, after a long confinement in London, returned to Woodhurst Court. Poor creature! she left it a laughing girl—she returned a worn, wan, wasted woman, whose husband was obliged, after a year's life as a curate in Bethnal Green, to winter in the South of France to save his impaired lungs and injured life.

Mr. Woodhurst, bitterly disappointed by the inexplicable conduct of the earl, and extremely anxious about Mina's health, was grown silent, morose, and careworn.

Gaspar Mountjoy had arrived on a visit, but he, too, was of a gloomy, silent character, and of a sarcastic bitterness, ascribed by those who knew him best to the fact that he was, and had been from his early boyhood, a hunchback. This accident had been caused by his uncle's ward, Oswald Egerton, in a combat for Mina's and Ladybird's favour when they



were children. He had struck Oswald while they were clambering up the rocks for some plant the girls coveted. Oswald had returned the blow. Gaspar had fallen heavily from a great height on to a sharp, projecting rock, and the result was that he was deformed and a cripple for life. He never forgave Oswald, nor were his feelings softened when he found Ladybird and Mina always gave Oswald in everything the preference over himself.


Mina, pale, sad, and altered, was able by this time to get up and roam about the grounds, and visit Phœbe Mayflower and Our Mary.

Time passed on, and the beautiful infant was a darling little blue-eyed, golden-haired girl of five years old, and Mina's greatest delight was in its innocent prattle.

Gaspar Mountjoy had seemed to take an interest in the lovely little child, and had often called at Phœbe's cottage with a toy, or a book, or a box of sugar-plums for Our Mary.

But the child, so talkative to every one else, was shy and silent with him, and would not sit on his knee or give him her little hand to walk with him in the garden. Ladybird, whose own boy was about the same age as Our Mary, would have liked to have Mary at the Hall to play with her little Frank; but Mr. Woodhurst—who always, somehow, associated Flora Flitter, Our Mary's supposed mother, with Mina's illness, and the earl's secession—could not endure the child, and would not let it visit the Court, at least when he was there.

Ladybird by this time was again a blooming, smiling creature, and her husband once more curate of Woodhurst, when one day two events occurred to drive the returning rose of health from Mina's cheek, and stretch her again in high fever and delirium on a sick bed—one was the announcement in the papers that Oswald Egerton, her father's ward, had perished in the collision of an American



steamer with a Newfoundland vessel on the River St. Lawrence. And just as she was recovering from her first shock of this terrible news, in rushed Phœbe Mayflower, pale, trembling, and without bonnet or shawl, to say that Our Mary was nowhere to be found ; that she had put her to bed as usual in her little cot ; had undressed her the last thing at night, and that in the morning, when she went to get her up and wash and dress her, she had found the window open, the little bed quite cold, and Our Mary gone !

CHAPTER XV.

What is Fashion? Ask of Folly:

She her worth can best express.

What is moping Melancholy?

Go and learn of Idleness.

BERNARD BARTON.

THE abduction of Our Mary was only a nine-days' wonder among the gossips of Woodhurst, but it was a source of intolerable grief to poor Mina, and of deep and lasting distress to Phoebe Mayflower.

Jack, too, who doted on the dear, good, lovely little girl, as if she had been indeed his own, did all in his power to discover the perpetrators of a deed so daring, so cruel, and so

incomprehensible. But all in vain. No clue could be found to the mystery.

Owing to Mina's dangerous illness, and Mr. Woodhurst's absence in London, when Phœbe first discovered that Our Mary had been carried off, much precious time was lost, and the child-stealers, whoever they were, had plenty of leisure to effect their escape, and to destroy all traces of their crime.


All kinds of reports were of course afloat, and Phœbe roused Jack into taking every step which her strong woman-sense and mother-heart suggested as likely to lead to the discovery of the wretch or wretches who had robbed her home of its sunshine, and her hearth of what she often called its little guardian angel, in the shape of Our Mary.

Owing to poor Phœbe and Jack Mayflower, rather than to Woodhurst of Woodhurst, who took the matter very coolly, there had been a meeting of magistrates to consult what had best be done. The Police were set to work.

London detectives examined the ante-room in which Our Mary had slept, and one of them gave it as his opinion that the little window was left open merely to mislead, for that no grown person (male or female) could have passed through that opening with a child in his or her arms, particularly a very well grown child, in her sixth year.

The detective rather inclined to the belief that the guilty person had, during the day, secreted him or herself in a large dark closet in Our Mary's little room, and in which Phœbe's dresses, and an old cloak or two, were hung up.

It did not escape his quick eye that the dust was disturbed in this closet, and some old intricate cobwebs broken up, and that there were slight traces of mould and gravel on the floor of the closet, which could not have been there unless some person coming recently from the little garden had brought them on his or her shoes.



Detective Meadows' questions had also elicited that on the evening before her abduction, Jack being at work, and Phœbe obliged to go out on an errand, little Mary had been left in charge of the cottage, and that when Phœbe returned, she found the child much elated at having purchased for her mammy a little glass cream-jug, with the contents of her money-box, of some of the muggers in the lane who had come to the cottage with their wares.

Detective Meadows at once repaired to the spot where the muggers' cart had been for some weeks an eyesore and a terror to the village, but all there seemed in *statu quo*. With a species of cloddish 'cuteness, they evaded or baffled the detective's questions, and he elicited nothing which would have justified him in apprehending any of these vagabonds.

When Our Mary had ceased to be an infant, Phœbe had removed her little crib from her own room into the small ante-chamber

at the top of the ladder-like stairs. Phoebe could not go into her own room without passing by Our Mary's little crib, and she distinctly remembered, on the last night on which she ever saw the child, stopping to notice how sweetly she slept—how much like an angel she looked, with her rosy cheek on the white pillow, and her long, golden curls floating over her shoulders, and how tidily and neatly “the good little wench,” as she called her, had folded up all her clothes, and strapped them round with a belt and buckle which in the day-time she wore round her little waist.

The clothes were carried off with Our Mary, and so were the little, tiny, hobnailed shoes, which Phoebe remembered seeing at the foot of the crib.

Then came the question—the important question—of “MOTIVE.” What motive could anyone have had for carrying off (at such a risk, too) a poor little girl, whose reputed

mother was herself a friendless parish orphan, and who, according to popular belief and general report, had been deserted, had laid her babe at the squire's door, or rather, put it in at the window on a dark morning of Christmas-eve, nearly six years back, and, thinking to go through the woods, had fallen into the Dark Pond, and been *Found Drowned*, as we have recorded—a child who, except for Mina's private bounty to Phœbe Mayflower, was dependent on the under-gardener and his wife, and who, if anything happened to them, or Miss Mina grew weary of the expense, had no certain refuge but the union? Certainly the child was singularly lovely and engaging, but she was never seen anywhere except at Woodhurst, and toddling to and fro with her little mates to the Dame and Sunday schools.

“If she had been seen by any grand lady who had no child of her own,” said Phœbe, “which I have heard of such things in books, I'd believe Our Mary would be worth her

weight in gold to such quality folk, and might have been stolen out of her bed by some hired ruffians to be made a grand lady of herself."

But no ladies had ever seen her except those up at the Court. True, there were muggers in the lane, and Our Mary—bless her little heart!—had given her bit of dinner out of her little basket, on her way to school, to one of their little children; but they wouldn't steal away a young child in an old mended cotton frock and old sun-bonnet! If she had been in silks and velvets, and a hat and feathers, like Master Frank up at Woodhurst Court, it might have been possible she'd have been stolen for her fine clothes, but no one could get sixpence for little Mary's bonnet and frock, and it was nonsense to think man or woman would have risked their lives for anything in poor little Mary's possession, or in the Mayflowers' humble cottage.

Conjecture, then, was quite at fault, and Woodhurst of Woodhurst evinced no great

anxiety, though he did, as a mere form, offer a reward of £100 for the discovery of the child, and another £100 for the apprehension of the offenders. The detectives returned to town, and Our Mary was soon forgotten, except by the poor Mayflowers and the melancholy Mina.

Dr. Johnson very shrewdly observed, that grief was never fatal except to the idle; and when told that a great lady had died of a broken heart for the loss of her husband, he had said, "If she had been a poor woman, with a little shop to mind, and a family to attend to, she would be alive now."

And so, though the loss of Our Mary must have been in reality much more severely felt at the cottage where she dwelt than at the Court—where she was never allowed to appear, save rarely and by stealth—yet Phœbe Mayflower, who was obliged to bustle about and get her work done, became apparently in some degree reconciled to the loss of Our

Mary, and could bear to talk of her and speculate on her fate ; while the slightest allusion to the child's mysterious abduction, and the possibility that she might have been murdered, caused Mina the most violent paroxysms of grief, ending in a dejection and despair that bordered on insanity.

Was it that ~~Mina~~ was a fine lady, with nothing to do, and Phoebe a poor man's wife, up early and late, and seldom able to sit down for half an hour idle from morning till night !

But on those rare occasions, when Phoebe's work *was* done, the hearth swept, the little kitchen tidied up, and the kettle, with its "singing for the million," on the bright fire, when Jack's tea was set out, and the hot cake was baked and buttered, and Phoebe could sit down for a few minutes, then an agonising grief, a passionate regret, a haunting memory, and a thousand distracting fears about the little one who had been "the angel by the

hearth," the little friend, help, companion, daughter, would send the hot, gushing tears from Phœbe's clear hazel eyes, and a spasm would contract her throat, and a tempest agitate her motherly bosom, and she would throw her clean white apron over her head and face and indulge herself in the luxury of "a regular good cry." And Jack, when he came in and found "the missus *troubling*," knew it was about Our Mary, and did not presume to scold or reproach her, as he would have done his first weak-spirited wife, but tried to comfort her, and took her in his arms and praised and blessed her for the good wife she had been to him, and wiped her eyes and pillowed her head on his broad breast in its fustian jacket, and prophesied that no real harm could come to such an angel as Our Mary; and when at that name Phœbe burst out weeping and sobbing afresh, poor Jack, sobbing too, would say—

"You've got *me* left, Phœbe, darling wife,

so don't fret and mourn as one without hope. Don't'ee, or I might be tooked bad, and die like Jerry Giles; that'ud be worse still, wouldn't it, Phœbe? Am I not more to thee than many daughters?"


And Phœbe would kiss him, and hug him up, and tell him he was more to her than all the world, and dry her eyes and try to smile, and then they would spend a happy evening together, Phœbe mending Jack's clothes, and Jack reading to her out of the Bible such parts as he thought most likely to comfort her in the great grief which he knew lay at the bottom of her heart as it did of his.

His choice, poor fellow, was not a very wise one. It often renewed the grief it sought to heal; but he did his best, and poor Phœbe knew it, and loved him and blessed him in her honest heart.

Our Mary was all the dearer to this simple couple, because they had had no child born to them since that first infant,

whose place had been so providentially supplied by the foundling from Woodhurst Court.


Mina, pale, wan, shadowy, was once more able to get about, and often did she avail herself of this return of strength to call at Phœbe's cottage when Jack was at work. Then, in spite of all the prohibitions Phœbe had received from Miss Tabby, Aunt Bussel, and Aunt Lackaday, and even from Woodhurst of Woodhurst himself, she would allow Mina to lead her gradually and adroitly to talk of the virtues and beauty of Our Mary. Every little anecdote of the angel-child's truth, tenderness, early piety, docility, and handy, helping ways, would be poured into Mina's willing ear. And there the rich heiress of Woodhurst Court, and the poor cottager, Phœbe Mayflower, would mingle their tears, and exchange opinions and conjectures as to what could have prompted anyone to carry off the little helpless, friendless, penniless girl, and who



it could have been, and how it was effected. Phœbe had had her mother, a very superstitious old Welsh woman, staying on a visit to her, and this aged gossip, who had been an under-housemaid at the Court in her girlhood (that is to say, in the time of the father of the present Woodhurst of Woodhurst Court, and before the smash, and that father's downfall) was well up in all the ghostly traditions of the place; and she, after she had heard the whole story of Mary's strange arrival at the Court, and her more strange abduction from the Cottage, and had slept upon it, and dreamed about it (after a good hot potation), announced it as her opinion that Our Mary had been spirited away, and that the Ghost of the Blue Chamber was at the bottom of it all.

Mina had no patience with what she considered gross superstition and senile folly, but Phœbe and Jack were not so incredulous. Jack even went so far as to declare that one

night, as he had occasion to go round to the Haunted Wing, to look for a seedsman's bill which he thought he had dropped while pruning a westena that grew against the wall, he had suddenly raised his eyes to the window of the Blue Chamber, and had seen not only a light, but the figure of the Ghost of the Blue Chamber, with his long, curly hair, pale, frowning face, old court-suit, and gash across his throat, standing at that very window, looking at the moon, "Which," said Jack, "however I got home I never knowed, but I knows I set off as if my very life wor at stake, and that when I got home to Phœbe here, as she can tell you, all in a cold sweat, and shaking in every limb, she said, says she to me, 'Why, Jack, you looks for all the world as if you had seen a ghost,' and she worn't far out, and I holds with mother-in-lor, and I does begin to think that Our Mary has been sperited away, and that the Ghost of the Blue Chamber is at the bottom of it."



Ladybird was very sorry when she heard of the mysterious disappearance of Our Mary, and she felt deeply for poor Mina in her double grief—that of the loss of her early friend, Oswald Egerton, whom Ladybird suspected she loved, and of her little *protégée*, to whom she was so much attached.

Ladybird, too, as a mother, trembled at the thought that her own and only darling, her little Frank, might have been carried off instead of Our Mary, and constant and vigilant was the watch the young mother kept over her heart's darling.

Gaspar Mountjoy was now an almost constant visitor at Woodhurst, not always staying at the Court, but dividing his time between that place and a small villa he had taken at Woodhurstville, for that was the pretentious name now given to that little inlet of the sea about half a mile from Woodhurst Court, and where at one time only one fishing-hut was seen.

Sea-air, sea-bathing, and entire seclusion, for the pursuit of his studies, were the motives Gaspar Mountjoy gave for taking this little bachelor abode. But he had other and greater reasons, which Aunt Bussel, with that want of tact which springs from the want of delicacy and good feeling, was resolved to discover; and as Woodhurst of Woodhurst had obtained Mr. Bussel an appointment in London, and therefore their visits to the Court were "few and far between," she resolved, while she *was* on the spot, to make the best of her time, and not, as she said, "let the grass grow under her feet."

Old Bussel was more fat, more meek, more good-natured, and more henpecked than when first we introduced him to our readers.

Mrs. Bussel was thinner, more angular, more shrill, and more of a vixen than ever.

Mrs. Lackaday was a more confirmed sloth,

and now lived entirely at Woodhurst Court, where nothing roused, disturbed, or discomposed her but the pranks of little Frank, Ladybird's beautiful, spoilt, petted boy, who had inherited the laughing eyes, golden locks, and captivating mouth of Ladybird herself.

Mrs. Bussel, who was a great spy and a great scandal-monger, had always had a notion that Gaspar Mountjoy was in love with Ladybird, and she told her sister Lackaday that, though Ladybird had, out of a spirit of contradiction, married Mr. Morris, yet she thought she was very much disposed to flirt with Gaspar now she was a married woman, and added, that she had accepted some very handsome presents, which it would have been more dutiful in Gaspar to have presented to his aunts.

Mrs. Lackaday rather liked gossip and scandal—very idle people generally do—and she listened and nodded while Mrs. Bussel vowed that she was resolved to get at the


rights of it, and put Mr. Morris on his guard ; but all was hushed up directly Aunt Tabby made her appearance, for Aunt Tabby was one of those dear, Christian women, who not only *say no ill, and do no ill, but think no ill of their neighbours.*

Woodhurst of Woodhurst was become very fond of the society of his nephew Gaspar Mountjoy, and Gaspar knew exactly how to make himself agreeable to his uncle. Not only was he by this time a junior partner in the great City firm of which Mr. Woodhurst was the head, and was able to consult with him, advise, speculate, and talk over schemes for converting thousands into tens of thousands, but Gaspar had made a close study of heraldry. He was an antiquarian, an archæologist, a historian, and actually had commenced a history of the Woodhurst family from the beginning, before the landing of the Romans, down to the present time.

There was another thing in Gaspar Mountjoy which pleased old Woodhurst, and that was the devoted attention and kindness he lavished on Mina.

Woodhurst of Woodhurst had always believed, in common with all other members of the family, that Gaspar had been in love with Ladybird, and he thought that had he himself been the cousin of the two beauties, the smiles and frolic-graces of Ladybird would have captivated him much more than the pale and melancholy beauty of the silent Mina ; but this very preference, which Mr. Woodhurst believed Gaspar felt for his lovely cousin, made him value and admire still more the untiring devotion of his conduct to the suffering, sorrowing Mina.

Mournful and melancholy as Mina was, her father felt she would have been ten times more so but for the attentions of her gifted cousin Gaspar, who had always some new story, some beautiful poem to read, some exquisite drawing



to show her, or would patiently beg and pray till he induced her to ride, drive, or walk with him.

At all hours Gaspar was at Mina's service, and could Mr. Woodhurst have forgotten the earl, who had kept up a friendly and most interesting correspondence with him, he would almost have wished—but no, Gaspar was a hunchback—lame, too; his father was only an illegitimate scion of the house of Mountjoy. No; that would never have done for his queen-like Mina; and who could tell? The earl was still single. There was a talk of his coming home!

Mina *had* survived the death of Oswald Egerton. Certainly life and reason had at one time been despaired of, but she *had* survived—she had not lost her sweet senses.

Gaspar had been a brother, more than brother to her. He had compelled her to turn from the Past, and to admit new thoughts, new images into her wounded heart and dis-

tracted mind. Who could tell, might he not, after all, see a coronet on her brow ! Might he not, after all, hail his Mina, Countess of Beaudesert !

CHAPTER XVI.

They called me blue-eyed Mary,
When friends and fortune smiled ;
But, ah ! how fortunes vary—
I'm now called Sorrow's child.

OLD BALLAD.

WE must now return to Our Mary, and inquire what has really befallen that beloved, loving, and lovely little girl, and what truth there was in the various surmises and guesses concerning her.

In the first place, then, the London detective, Meadows, was so far right that she had

been carried off in a sleep unusually sound even for a child of her tender years—and that, too, by a woman, who had been secreted during a great part of the day, and some hours of the night, in the large dark closet in Our Mary's little room. So far the detective Meadows was right, and Jack Mayflower was wrong. The Ghost of the Blue Room had nothing at all to do with it. Again, the detective was right in his suggestion that the window was opened solely to mislead.

The woman who had narrowly observed the simple fastening of the cottage-door by day had waited till Phœbe and her husband were fast asleep—fast asleep, as those are who rise early and work hard—she had then thrust Our Mary's neat little bundle of clothes into a very large bag, popped in her small hob-nailed shoes and stockings, wrapped the little sleeping cherub in a large cloak (all by the light of the full moon that streamed into the small room), and then she had hurried down-

stairs, out at the little garden-gate, up a green lane, and to a wild corner of the furze-tufted common, where a mugger's cart awaited her.

Two ill-looking men hailed her with the words—"Hollo! Moonlight Meg, have you nabbed the kid!"

"All's safe, it's under my cloak," said Moonlight Meg. "Why don't ye drowse the glim? Has Daisy had a good feed? Lend a hand here, whilst I gets into the van with the child, and then push along a good 'un. Don't spare Daisy. If we catch the up-train all's safe, and you and Mad Mike can come back to your old station for a few days, and no one know you've ever stirred."

"When are we to handle the shiners, Meg?" asked Jawing Jem.

"Not till we are on board the Sairey Sands with the kid," said Moonlight Meg. "We're to have the half then, and the other half when we lands at Sydney."

"But wouldn't he have paid double if we'd

put the kid out o' the way for him entirely?" asked Jem.

"Very like he might, but I hadn't the heart to do it. She've got a look o' my poor little dead Bessie; and she gave the childer all her little dinner that she was taking to the school with her, and went without herself."

"And so," said Jawing Jem, "by giving away her dinner she've *saved her bacon*. Well, it's no odds to me; it's your job this is, not mine. So, if you makes a mull of it, it's your look-out;—and now, I don't want to put your monkey up, old gal, quite t'other; this may be a good spec., but let me give you one word of advice. Till you've got the kid safe on board the Sairey Sands, don't you let a drop o' liquor pass your lips. If you puts a thief in your mouth to steal away your brains, as I heard a feller they called a temp'rance orator say, this scheme 'll be knocked on the 'ead, just like so many others, through the same think."

"You hold your jaw, can't you?" said Meg. "You're a fine one to preach, you are—you as is dead drunk half your time, and screwed t'other. I knows what I'm about. I shan't touch a drop till all's safe."


"I'd have made short work of it," said Jem, "and there would have been no fear of no-think. A knock on the head, a heavy stone or two round the neck, and a pitch into that ere river, and the chances are you never heard no more of she."

"But I think she'll be very useful to us in many ways; she'll be company, and if we bring her up handy, she'll be a great help in them forrin parts," said Moonlight Meg.

"Don't she sleep unnatural sound?" asked Jawing Jem.

"Don't she? I should think she do. I took care o' that. I give her a lollypop that I knew would keep her eyes closed till we got to Lunnun at least."

While thus speaking Moonlight Meg had



slipped on Our Mary's clothes, and over all had put a ragged, worn, old stuff coat.

"Don't you mean to clip the little filly's mane?" said the man.

"No, I'll tuck 'em up, and hide 'em under this old bonnet; but they're so like my poor Bessie's, I can't cut 'em off—so that's just what it is!"

"But I can," said the man, seizing Our Mary's long golden curls with one hand, and a large coarse pair of shear-like scissors Meg wore with the other.

"You touch 'em if you dare!" said the woman, snatching away the scissors, and hitting him a heavy blow on the head with them.

"Mind what you're about or I'll tache ye," growled the man, and at this moment the muggers' van, or covered cart, stopped.

"Here we are, close upon the station," said Mad Mike, who had been driving. "Meg, you'd better get out here. I'll go with you, and get you a third-class ticket, and then you

can slip in unbeknown, and, onst in Lunnun, you can slip out unbeknown too. So, if there's any inquiries at this ere station when the kid's missed, nothing will be found out."

Mad Mike got the ticket, and the woman clambered into a third-class carriage with Our Mary still fast asleep under her cloak.

The muggers' covered cart returned across the moonlit common to its old station at the end of the green lane. The train went rapidly on. The moonlight began to wane, the air grew very cold, the sky was dark. It is always cold and dark just before the dawn. By degrees there came out a few faint streaks of light in the east; they spread into a vast expanse of light grey, which, by degrees, deepened into "celestial, rosy red;" then this red veil seemed to be withdrawn, and golden and orange hangings to shroud the chambers of the sun; presently they, too, were drawn aside, and the golden God of Day—the glorious sun—looked forth upon a sleeping


world. Everything seemed bright and smiling in the floods of yellow light. The lark sprang up into the sunny sky. The daisies looked with their yellow faces from out of their white frilled night-caps. Every spire was turned to gold—every hill-top wore a topaz crown. The cocks began to crow, the sheep to bleat, the cattle to low, the ducks to cackle, and the geese to hiss. Blue smoke began to issue from cottage chimneys, dogs to bark, labourers to go forth to their toil, and the moon, pale, worn, shrunken, and out of place, appeared like an actress by daylight, and hid herself away.

Yes, it was morning, and in spite of the strong opiate which Moonlight Meg had administered to Our Mary, in the shape of a lollypop, as she came home from school, the child, accustomed to rise with the sun and the lark, stirred, rubbed her eyes, moved uneasily, murmured the words “mammy” and “daddy,” and then went off again into a deep, opiate sleep.

On went the swift train—on, on, on!—sometimes through dark tunnels, smelling like vaults, not very pleasant to those with bad consciences and engaged in dark deeds like Moonlight Meg, then emerging into fresh scenes of pastoral beauty, green hills or rich lowlands, across blue moors and past hamlets, where the little cottages seemed to gather round the old time-worn church, with its spire pointing to heaven, like children kneeling around an old grandsire who was telling of the better land to which he was pointing and hastening.

Moonlight Meg, as the morning wore on, grew very hungry and very “dry,” to use her own expression, but she never stirred from the corner she had chosen, nor exchanged a word with any fellow-traveller.

At length, towards noon, the beautiful country was exchanged for an almost continuous array of houses or building-grounds, the air had lost its balmy freshness, wild-



flowers and the milky breath of cows no longer perfumed it. A smell of mortar, gas, and smoke tainted the breeze ; on one side huge breweries sent up their clouds of dense steam redolent of malt and hops ; on the other, manufactories of different kinds blackened the sky with their smoke.

Moonlight Meg beheld a dark mass in the distance, from which a dense vapour seemed to rise ; by degrees countless spires grew distinct to her sight ; the square dark towers of old Westminster Abbey, the glittering pinnacles of the Houses of Parliament, the dome of St. Paul's, and hundreds of other churches became brightly visible. The train glides into a stupendous archway, vaulted, lofty, magnificent. Moonlight Meg and Our Mary have reached the Paddington-station.

CHAPTER XVII.

Oh, say not, dream not, heavenly notes
To childish ears are vain ;
That the young mind at random floats,
And cannot catch the strain !
Was not Our Lord a little child,
And tutored to obey—
By father dear and mother mild
Instructed how to pray ?

THE CHRISTMAS YEAR.

MOONLIGHT MEG's first care was to slink unperceived out of the third-class carriage in which she had been huddled up, cold and cramped, for so many hours, and to hurry off with Our Mary, still asleep in her arms, to a

low public-house in a little back street. Here she asked to be allowed, as she had been travelling all night with her child, to go to bed. She said she only wanted to rest for a few hours, as she had to go aboard ship at night; but added, if they could let her have a good bed, a tidy room, a rousing fire, and some breakfast, she'd pay them well.

As the landlady did not much like her looks, Moonlight Meg produced an old leathern purse, and taking out half-a-sovereign, offered payment beforehand. This seemed quite to alter the landlady's view of the case. She led the way to a room where a fire was laid, called a slip-shod girl, who, with "wheels" of patent wood, soon kindled a good fire, and by the means of a bachelor's kettle got some good hot tea ready in a few minutes.

Moonlight Meg laid Our Mary in the bed—a good full bed, and very clean—and then Moonlight Meg sat down to what she called a good dish of tea, with several rounds of

buttered toast, and a feast of fried eggs and bacon. She then prepared to lie down on the bed.

“Put the teapot to the fire,” she said, “and leave these breakfast things agin the child awakes. Put on some coals, and then don’t disturb me till I call.”

The girl did as she was ordered, and left the room.

Moonlight Meg then pulled down the blind, locked the door, crept into bed between the blankets, close to Our Mary, and was soon fast asleep, as might have been known to all the household by her loud and regular snore.

It was evening when Moonlight Meg woke with a start. She dreamt that the police were after her to regain the child, and in her sleep she heard the child crying bitterly, and calling on its mammy and its daddy. Part of this dream she found true, for Our Mary had at length awakened, and terrified at the strangeness of the place, and the sight of the rough,

brown, brawny woman by her side, was crying bitterly, and calling out, with many sobs, for her mammy and her daddy.

“Hold yer jaw, you little good-for-nothing brat!” said Moonlight Meg, afraid the people of the house would hear the child, and furious at having been waked out of her sleep; “hold yer jaw, or I’ll make ye!” and she seized the little round arm, and pinched it till the child flinched and cowered.

“Where am I?” sobbed Our Mary. “Why am I not in my own little white bed? Why have I got this rough, dirty old coat on? Where’s mammy? Where’s daddy?”

“They’ve sold you to me, and begged me to take you away.”

“Mammy sold me to you! Why, you’re Meg the Mugger. Mammy told me not to go so nigh you, ’cos you’d maybe steal me away! Mammy never sold me! Mammy loved me, so did daddy, so did Miss Mina! You’ve stolen me away!”

"Hold yer jaw. You're to bide with me a bit; and if you're a good wench and holds your tongue, I'll take you back agin to your mammy; but if you don't, I'll larrup you well."

"Take me back to mammy, and to daddy, and Miss Mina," cried the child passionately. "I won't stay here."

"You won't; and you will kick up that dust, will ye?" said Moonlight Meg.

Still the child cried out, "Mammy! Mammy!"

There lay the strap that had been round the bundle of Our Mary's clothes. The woman seized it.

"Now, we'll see who'll be mistress, you or I," she cried in a voice hoarse with passion, "you little audacious. impudent brat;" and heavily the cruel, cutting strokes of the strap descended on to the tender flesh of the little shrinking girl.

"Oh, don't! Oh, pray don't!" gasped out

the child, in its agony. "Oh, pray ! Oh, pray ! Oh, dear, kind, good——, don't ! I will be good ! I won't cry ! Pray ! Pray ! Pray !"

"There, now you knows what you've got to expect if you ever cries or says a word, or disobeys me in any way," and she laid down the strap.

Beaten with many stripes, sore, humbled, bruised, and even bleeding, Our Mary lay crying noiselessly under the bed-clothes, while Moonlight Meg poured out a basin of tea and cut some bread and butter.

"Now," she said, "Molly"—(she knew the child was always called "Our Mary")—"be a good little wench, sit up and eat your breakfast, or your tea, or whatever you likes to call it. I thinks you knows now who's master. No sulks. There's three things I'll always larrup you for, and so I tells you—one is telling me a lie ; another, ever opening your lips to any living soul about me, or how I got ye, or where you comed from, or saying any other

than that you're my child ; and the third is, you ever crying, sarsing, or turning sulky. If you don't do none of these I'll be as kind a mammy to ye, and kinder, too, than she you've left behind. Now, sit up and take your tea."

Our Mary was listening with a breaking heart and almost broken spirit to Moonlight Meg's address, and trying hard not to sob and weep. But at the words "a kinder mammy than she you've left behind," the thought of all the tenderness and care of Phœbe crossed her young mind, and though Meg again seized the strap, she could not check her sobs and tears.

Meg, however, did not strike her again. She let her have her cry out, and then she lifted her off the bed, placed her at the table, and gave her the basin of tea and plate of bread and butter. Our Mary was faint with hunger, and she took meekly and readily what was placed before her.

Intense and spirit-bowing was the dread Meg thus inspired in that little wildly-beating

heart. The agonising pain of the only flogging the poor child had ever had—never had she been even touched, except in kindness, before—had completely subdued her. She shrank when the great brown, bony hand approached her ; and she whose blue, clear eyes, had ever fearlessly and frankly looked up to Heaven, and to the kind faces shining on her, now only stole timid, scared, sidelong glances from under her eyelids, swollen with crying, and her long, wet, dark eyelashes at the great, coarse, cruel, brown, masculine woman, who was indirectly trying to win her back to confidence and calm.

When Our Mary had eaten her bread and butter, and drank her tea, she put back her spoon in her cup, as Phœbe had taught her, and, folding her little hands, said her simple grace, and Meg cried—

“ There’s my good little wench ! We shan’t want no more help from rod, or strap, or stick ; it’s better to have one regular good

larruping at first, Molly, and get it over, than to be always knocked about and pinched, and slapped, and jawed like some is. So now, I'll just wash and tidy thee and myself abit, and then we'll go out and look at the pretty shops and lamps."

It was getting dark when Moonlight Meg, after having paid her bill, and made herself and Our Mary look "something like," as she said, left the Queen's Head, and hurried along till she came up with an omnibus going in the direction she wanted. She got in, taking Our Mary on her lap, and when this omnibus stopped in the Regent's Circus, she entered another, which took her to Westminster. She had friends, or, as she called them, *pals*, living in the Broadway, and as she found time pass very slowly at the Queen's Head, and she could not go on board the Sarah Sands till the next day at noon, she resolved to go and take up her quarters for the night in her friend's back attic. When she left the omni-

bus, she took little Mary by the hand, and was trudging steadily on, till, at the bright glass and mahogany door of a splendidly illuminated gin-palace, she came upon the very woman she was about to visit. This woman, a bold, sly, horrid-looking wretch, with ragged hair, no cap, and a disordered dress, was accompanied by several other dreadful-looking women.

In the red eyelids, livid cheeks, blue lips, and tremulous hands of all, as well as in their rags and dirt, you might have discerned the dram-drinker.

"Why, Moonlight Meg, is that you?" cried the woman. "Well, if ever—no, I never thought to clap eyes on you again. Come and have a drop, for the sake of old times."

Meg refused.

"Soaking Sue," as the wretched "pal" was called, was clever in her own way. She tried ridicule.

"You aint become one of them tee-totallers,



is you, Meg? I knows you're always a getting into hot water, but I little thought ever to see a pal o' mine take to cold water."

"I aint no tee-totaller," said Meg; "but I wants to keep my head clear and my heart up."

"Come along, then; you shall have enough to keep your heart up, and yet let your head keep clear."

"Well, just the leastest drop," said Meg, and she was led in in triumph.

After having seated little Mary—Our Mary—on the doorstep, and whispered to her "that if she dared to stir a step or open her lips, she'd give her—she knew what now—only ten times more than she'd had, for that she'd cut her right in halves!" in she went with the horrible gin-drinkers, and there on the doorstep sat Our Mary, terror, despair, and unutterable woe in her little heart, and feeling conscious for the first time that she was "ALONE IN THE WORLD."

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It is needless to say that Meg, having money, had, after the first two glasses, to stand treat; that she and her sister Bacchantes went on drinking, drinking, drinking, until from maudlin fondness they got to fisticuffs; that Meg, having been much exasperated at some utterance of Soaking Sue's about her being a *mugger*, and having a very *ugly mug* to walk about with, a terrible battle ensued; that Moonlight Meg laid about her right and left; that the combatants were turned out by the landlord and pot-boys into the street, when the police soon decided the contest by carrying them all to the station-house.

And all this while Our Mary, drawn up into the smallest possible compass on the doorstep of "The Palmerston" public-house, sat, cold and shivering, and trying not to sob, quite forgotten by Moonlight Meg, and quite unheeded by every one.

When the excited wretches, Meg, Sue, and

the rest of them, were kicked out by the landlord, their hair streaming, their lips cut and their noses bleeding, and yelling, shrieking, cursing, swearing, and striking out at each other, Our Mary had hidden her little face in her old stuff dress, and when she looked out the police had taken Meg and the rest of the combatants to the police-station.

Our Mary, child as she was, knew that Moonlight Meg was gone, and a sort of hope that she would not return crossed the little anxious mind and sore heart. She stood up and looked round her, but the strangeness of the place, the horrid faces of the wretches that passed by, the dreadful language that met her ear, and the sense of danger, loneliness, and having been stolen away and being a lost child, like one she had read of in a little story-book given her at school for good behaviour, all these overcame her, and she burst out crying bitterly.

“What is the matter, poor little girl?”

said a boy about nine years of age, pale, slender, with a large forehead and pretty face, and whose eyes looked as if he had been crying too.

"I've been stolen away from mammy and daddy, and I'm a lost child," sobbed Our Mary.

"Who stole you away, little girl?" asked the boy.

"Meg! that's the name she went by. She was a mugger in the dark lane."

"And where is she now?"

"She went in there, and told me if I stirred she'd cut me in halves, but she've been out since having a fight, and some blue sodgers have come and took her away."

"And are you crying after her?"

"Oh, no; she've beat me cruelly," said the child, baring her lovely arms and shoulders, and showing to the pitying boy the weals and bruises left by the strap.

"You'd like to get away from her, wouldn't you?" said the boy.

“Oh, yes!” cried Our Mary. “Will you take me away? Do, there’s a dear, kind boy. Do take care of me. I’m a very good girl. I never was beat before. I’m called ‘Our Mary,’ and mammy and daddy always said I was a upright, downright, good little wench.”

The little boy stooped down to kiss the lovely young face held up so imploringly to him. He was flattered at the appeal to his protection. He had sympathy with suffering. He was a stepchild of Fortune and of his father’s handsome, cruel, jealous second wife. He himself had just escaped from a dark room in which his father, once so kind, had shut him up, after a severe horsewhipping, given at the instigation and through the misrepresentations of his stepmother.

“I am very unhappy, too, little Mary,” he said. “I have been terribly flogged to-day; but then I’m a boy, and I mustn’t mind pain. I’m going to see my foster-mother; she always comforts me. She feels for every-

one, she does. Come along with me there, little Mary ; I'll tell her all about you, and I know she'll take you in ; and she'll give you a nice supper, and let you sleep along with Rosy. Rosy's not much older than you are, and I call her my little wife ; but now I think you shall be my little wife, for I'm sure, when you're clean and tidy, you're much prettier than Rosy."

"Can't you have two little wives?" said Our Mary, who could not bear the thought of robbing Rosy of her little husband.

"I don't know, perhaps I might ; we'll see ; but come along now. There, give me your little hand, we haven't very far to go."

Little Mary was now all smiles. She put her hand readily in that of her young protector, and trotted along cheerfully by his side.

On they went through the crowded Broadway, with its torches and candle-lamps, and night market, and bawling costermongers, its

drunken men and disorderly women, until the boy said—

“Now, little Mary, I’ll carry you over this muddy crossing, and there, just opposite, is my foster-mother’s house. There, don’t you see a stall with fancy boxes and balls, and combs, and all sorts of pretty things, and there she is selling a doll, bless her kind, dear face. Her name’s Toddles, and she nursed me! And there’s Rosy! I nursed her and taught her to walk. There she is playing in the street with bad boys and girls, though her mammy and I both told her not. Oh, Rosy’s very self-willed. But come along, little Mary. I know Mammy Toddles ’ll take you in and be a mother to you, as she was to me, so I’ll lift you over the crossing, and then we’ll be as welcome as the flowers in May!”

The brave, kind boy caught Our Mary up in his arms as he spoke, and, carrying her safely across the Broadway, landed her at the door of that very Mrs. Toddles, the kind, good,

thrifty creature, whom the reader may remember as having sheltered the young lady in the second chapter of this tale.

Nearly six years have passed since then. The boy, the pale nurse-child, who was then engaged in rocking Mrs. Toddles' last baby in the yellow wicker cradle, is now Our Mary's young protector. The baby is that same naughty, chubby Rosy, playing in the streets against orders, with bad boys and girls.

Mrs. Toddles looks much the same—a little stouter—and with three more children to provide for ; but the sunny face is as beaming as ever with the warmth of the heart, and the tea is as nicely set out, and the fire as bright, the hearth as clear, and the little room as tidy as it was six years ago. It was into that little room that the young boy, her foster-child, now led, proudly and confidently, Our Mary.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Oh, tell me, blue-eyed Mary,
Ah, whither dost thou roam
In this wide world of sorrow ;
Hast thou no friends, no home ?

OLD BALLAD.

“WHY, Charley, boy !” said Mrs. Toddles, “whatever brings you here so late, and what little wench have you got with you ?” And she kissed Charley, and stroked down and put back the long, golden hair that had fallen over Our Mary’s sweet little face, and when she saw the cherub-like beauty of the child, she kissed her too.

—

"Mammy!" said the boy, "Mrs. Linden" (he never would call his cruel stepmother mamma or mother) "has set papa against me, and made him shut me up in a dark room, and beat me worse than ever, and so I've run away. First, I had thoughts of jumping out of window, or hanging myself to the tester of the great best bed, but then I thought how you, my kind mammy, would cry, and so I resolved to come here and ask your advice; and as I came along I met with this little girl. She was crying, too, she'd been beaten very cruelly, and from what I can make out, she's been stolen away by a gipsy or a mugger, or some such horrid creature, and she ordered little Mary—her name is Mary—to sit down on the step of the Palmerston public while she went inside drinking with her friends, and they got drunk, and were carried off to the station-house by the police, and Our Mary—she says she is always called Our Mary—was left crying there by herself."

"Poor little darling!" said Mrs. Toddles, "we must see what can be done for her. She shall stay here to-night, at any rate. She can sleep with Rosy;—and as for you, Charley, I haven't it in my heart to send you back to Mrs. Linden and your papa to be flayed alive. You can have your old bed upstairs, my dear; but I daresay, directly you're missed, Mrs. Linden will guess you're here, and then there'll be a fine to-do."

"Oh, mammy! perhaps she won't guess that I'm here!" said the boy. "When last she made father horsewhip me I said I'd run away and go to sea, if I was ever half so ill used again for nothing, and I dare say she'll fancy I've been as good as my word, and she'd be glad enough of it; but if they should come after me, you'd hide me up here, would you not, mammy?"

"Ah! that I would, with all my heart, Charley, if it wasn't against the law, and might get daddy into trouble. Daddy's been

at work at a tough job, two hundred miles off, these six weeks past, and I'm just expecting him home to tea this blessed minute. But never mind, he'll be right glad to see thee, Charley; and as to little Mary, why, he'll think a hangel have dropped down among us, that he will!"

As she spoke, the postman brought a letter to the door.

"Why, it's from Joe!" said Mrs. Toddles, turning very pale. "Read it to me, Charley, you're a quicker reader of writing than I am. Whatever have he writ for?"

Charley read—

DERE WIF,—i takes upp my pen to tel you i've got the ofer off a goode profettible jobb, 20 miles funder of, wich it'll be 10 pund profet. So iff you appruves, and aint like to be confined for six weeks, i shall agree. rite a loin by returne. Gif my love to the childern, greate hand small. i hop Rossey be a better gal.

"Kepe upp yure sperits, and don't work to hard, nor tug over the wash-tub, but nuss your self a bit øgen your time of trile, hand think of ten pund i shall bring oam!—Your dutiful hand loving husbind,

"Blackburn, Jan. 14th, 18 "JOE TODDLES."

“Poor daddy, he isn’t coming after all!” said Mrs. Toddles, wiping away a tear. “Well, I did not ought to complain, but to be thankful he’s in good work; but somehow I feels lost without ’im. He’s such a good one at advising, he is. He’s fust-rate at selecting a hopinion. I knows he’d like to be back here! Ah, that he would! He loves his home, poor Joe, that he do! but he never thinks of his self. What’s best for the missus and the children—that’s all his thoughts. Well, all, all’s for the best no doubt, so come, Charley, we’ll have our teas now. Charley, fetch Rosy in, and Bell, scald the pot, and Tom, and Nan, and Sally set down on the bench like good children. And you, little Mary, come here—let me take off that great old granny’s bonnet, and that heavy stuff coat, or whatever it is!”

Our Mary, always docile and obedient, and loving the kind tone and smile that reminded her of her mammy’s, went up to Mrs. Toddles,

who took off the large old black coal-scuttle bonnet, and as she did so, down fell the long golden locks of silken hair, hanging in bright profusion to Our Mary's little waist. Mrs. Toddles then took off the frightful old overcoat which Moonlight Meg had put on over Our Mary's little frock, and there she stood, her pretty neck, shoulders, and arms bare, and with the cruel stripes, bruises, and weals yet visible on them, dressed in a neat little print dress which Mina had made for her. The child's face and form were perfectly beautiful, and her little limbs were exquisitely and delicately moulded, her hands and feet were very small and dainty, and though her expressions were countrified, and her grammar the same as that of Phoebe and Jack Mayflower, yet Mrs. Toddles thought she looked a born lady—a wandering little princess royal, or a fairy queen. As the child was pale, and seemed very tired, Mrs. Toddles resolved that she would not worry her with any ques-

tions that night, but give her her tea and bread and butter, and put her to bed with Rosy.

Mrs. Toddles was not in good spirits. She was disappointed not to have her husband back, and she was troubled in her mind how to act about Charley Linden and this little wandering Mary without his advice. Rosy, too, was very wilful, and led Charley a long chase before he could capture her.

Little Mary was silent. She was thinking of her mammy, her daddy, her home, and Miss Mina; and every now and then her lips would quiver, and tears fill her lovely blue eyes, and moisten their long, dark lashes. Still she drank her tea and ate her bread and butter, and when she had done she put her spoon in her cup, as Phœbe Mayflower had taught her it was "manners" to do, and folding her little rosy hands, and pressing them against her breast, as she bowed her pretty head, she said—

"Thank God for a good tea, and for all blessings, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!"

"What a pattern the little lass would be for Rosy," said Mrs. Toddles to herself.

Rosy seemed to think so too, for she was watching Our Mary with her round, black eyes, and cherry mouth wide open; and not stuffing that mouth full and drinking fast, and half-choking herself, and plunging her hands into the sugar-dish, or kicking her feet about, or doing any of the naughty tricks which made her such a trouble and trial; and when she had done, she too put her spoon in her cup and said her grace.

"Bell," said Mrs. Toddles to one of her elder girls—"put Rosy and little Mary to bed. Mary can have one of Rosy's night-gowns; and, Rosy, be a good girl, and let Mary have half the bed, and don't kick her or pull the clothes off her."

"No, mammy," said Rosy, who, though

naughty, was affectionate and impulsive, "I'll be very good to her. I love her. She's so pretty and so good. I'll try to be like her, mammy!"

Our Mary, upon this, kissed Rosy; and Bell put them both to bed.

Charley Linden, very tired with the painful excitement of the day, and with his long walk, was very glad to go to bed—so were all the children—all early risers, all trained to work—all, except Rosy, willing to help.

Mrs. Toddles sat a long time alone in her husband's arm-chair, looking into the red ashes of the expiring fire, thinking of Our Mary, in whom she already felt a lively interest, and wondering what she ought to do, and what the sweet child's history really was. Then her mind dwelt on Charley, her dear, brave, frank, loving, foster-child, and all his trials and perils. Then her own children and their future destinies crossed her mind, especially Rosy's; and at last she thought what if

anything should happen to her in her approaching trial? For latterly she had had very bad times, and she had a dread on her mind that all would not go well with her. By overwork and long days at the washing-tub and short nights after (like all her sisters of the working-classes, doing extra work when she should have done none at all, and paying for it by life-long maladies), she had seriously injured a good constitution, and she knew it, and thought if she were taken away—Toddles—her Toddles—her only love—her husband would marry again—and *her* children would have a stepmother, perhaps like Mrs. Linden! Oh! the dreadful thought that Joe should love another woman! Another tidy his hearth, mend his clothes, welcome him home! This thought was very painful to her; a sort of vague jealousy of an imaginary rival filled her heart, and being low and poorly, she began to cry, but soon recovering, she said—"God's will be done," and then she sank on her knees

in fervent prayer, and went comforted to bed. While she was undressing, Bell, who slept with her, told her that Our Mary had, after she was undressed, knelt down of her own accord and said her prayers, and then stood up and repeated a hymn—

“Lord, now another day is gone.”

“So perfectly and so prattily she went through that ere long hymn,” said Bell, “that Rosy, not to be outdone, said her prayers and repeated all she could remember of—

‘Why should our garments, made to hide
Our parents’ shame, provoke our pride?’

which she did not know perfectly, but when she made a mistake Our Mary set her right, and she was quite willing to be tached by the little gal.

“She seems to know a sight of hymns,” continued Bell; “and to have such tidy, old-maidish, nice little ways. She folded up all her clothes as neat as print before she

got into bed, and then our Rosy did the same."

The truth was, Mina had taken privately great delight and interest in teaching Our Mary to read and say a great number of hymns and pretty pieces of poetry. She could sew and hem, too, and had worked a sampler. These latter acquirements she had been taught at the village school, and Phœbe had done her best to make her handy, notable, and useful.

Phœbe loved to have her by her side to help her and run on errands when she was busy in the house, and daddy liked to take her with him into the garden, and hear her pretty prattle as she tried to aid him to weed or to plant, or rowed with him across the lake-like pond when he wanted to cross over to the island to see to the rock-work and flowers there. And he would give Our Mary a little oar which he had made for her, and pretend that she made the boat go swiftly on.

Our Mary's delight was to be useful. If she could help anyone, or do good to anyone, she was happy.

Phœbe often said she was sure Our Mary was born good ; and though Aunt Bussel said that was unorthodox, Phœbe thought so still.

CHAPTER XIX.

Oh, mayst thou ever be what now thou art !
Nor unbeseem the promise of thy spring ;
As fair in form ; as pure yet warm in heart—
Love's image upon earth without his wing.

BYRON.

THE next morning the little household was up betimes. Our Mary set a pattern to all the other children, for Phœbe had taught her to wash and dress herself without help, so nicely too ! and to comb, smooth, and arrange her long golden ringlets, and say her prayers and her hymn, and put her room to rights, and then to ask her what she could do to

help ; and so, with a deep sigh and welling tear and quickly-suppressed sob at the thought of her mammy Mayflower, Our Mary went up to Mrs. Toddles, and said—

“ Please, ma’am, can’t I help you ? I always toast the bread and set the breakfast things for mammy. She says mine are little helping hands.”

“ Let me help, too, mammy,” said Rosy.

Never before had Rosy offered to do anything but hinder.

Oh, mighty power of example ! well may the wisdom of ages proclaim thee better than precept.

Mrs. Toddles found plenty for both Our Mary and Rosy to do.

When breakfast was over, the little ones gone to school, and the elder children to their work, Mrs. Toddles, Charley Linden, and Our Mary were alone in the little parlour. Mrs. Toddles then said—

“ I’ve been ‘troubling’ a good deal in the

night about both of you ; and I can't make up my mind what's best, 'cos why, Joe's not here to advise me. As for you, Charley, I'm sartain sure the day won't go over our heads without your Par and Mrs. Linden coming here to know if I've seed you, and if you likes to chance it you can ; but as to little Mary here, it strikes me we're a losing precious time. I think we ought to adwertise and give information at the police-station, and all manner."

" Oh, but then," said Charley Linden, " that horrid woman might claim her. You see, if she's a regular child-stealer, of course she would be able to make up a fine story, and then Our Mary would be given back to her. But what's the matter, little Mary ?"

The child had turned deadly pale, and her features and limbs were almost rigid with terror, at the possibility of her being again in the clutches of Moonlight Meg.

Mrs. Toddles, much alarmed, took her in her arms, loosened her frock, bathed her face

with cold water, and tried to soothe and comfort her.

“Don’t let me go back to HER!” gasped the child. “Don’t let her take me away!”

“No, my darling,” said kind Mrs. Toddles. “No, she shall never have Our Mary again.”

“If she were not given to that vile woman,” said Charley Linden, “she would be sent to the union, wouldn’t she, mammy?”

“Oh, don’t let me go to the union!” cried Our Mary, to whom the word union was familiar, from all the disputes she had heard at Phœbe’s cottage between Mrs. Bussel and Phœbe about the propriety of the union as Our Mary’s abode; and often, when Mrs. Bussel was gone, she had heard Phœbe vow her dear little wench should never go to the union to be beaten and starved and dressed in a pauper’s frock, and have her pretty curls clipped close, and to be made to live with bad, dirty, idle girls, and eat dry bread and drink water-gruel.

The union was a word associated with great horrors in Our Mary's little heart, and so she slipped from Mrs. Toddles' lap, and kneeling before her, she raised her little hands and her beseeching, tearful eyes, and said—

“ Oh, don't let them take me to the union. Mammy said it would break her heart if I ever went there ; and I heard her again and again promise the lady I never should go there. Oh, let me stay till I can go back to mammy. I'll be a good, helping little girl ! Oh, pray, pray do ! ”

“ Who was the lady, my dear, who made your mammy promise that you should never go to the union ? ” asked Mrs. Toddles.

“ Miss Minar, ” said the child.

“ And where did you live, my love ? ”

“ At mammy Phœbe's. ”

“ And where did Miss Minar live ? ”

“ At the Court — the great house, and Master Frank lived there ; he's not quite as

big as I am, but he's dressed so fine, and has such a sight of toys."

"And what was the name of the master of the great house?"

"He was called The Squire."

"And did he ever go and see you?"

"No; and Miss Minar never had me up at the Court to play with Master Frank only when the Squire was away. Every one is afraid of the Squire."

"And was Master Frank the Squire's little boy?"

"I don't know, ma'am; but his maris is a beautiful lady, with long curls like mine, and she's called Ladybird. Isn't that a pretty name?"

"Very. But what was the name of the place where you lived?"

"Mammy's."

"Did you go to school?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What was the name of the place where the school was?"

“ Dame Newman’s.”

It was clear the child had not been taught, as all children of high or low, rich or poor should be, the exact name in full of the place where they live and the people they live with.

Had Our Mary known that the village where her mammy lived was Woodhurst, near Old Town, S——shire, and that the squire’s name was Woodhurst of Woodhurst, a few lines which Charley Linden could easily have written, would have restored Our Mary to her anxious mammy and to her sorrowing benefactress Mina. But though she had a sort of vague idea of a place she called “ Woodhouse,” Mrs. Toddles and Charley did not fancy that it could be the name of her village, but of some kind of out-house in which she had been used to play.

And Charley had, among his old books up-stairs, a geography, with a map of England, and he looked carefully all over it, but found no place called Woodhouse ; and while

they were talking it over, and Charley Linden was advising Mrs. Toddles to keep Our Mary, (as God seemed to have sent the child to her,) a carriage stopped at the door. It was now Charley's turn to grow pale.

"That's papa and Mrs. Linden," he said.

"Oh, where can I hide?"

In an instant he had decided what to do. He jumped into the large, old, wicker cradle, just then vacant, pulled the patchwork coverlid over him, and lay there quite hidden, and still as a mouse, save for the loud beating of his little frightened heart.

Little Mary, too, was frightened, for she understood that some great danger threatened the brave, frank, gentle boy who had saved her, so she sat her little self down on a stool before the cradle, thinking thereby to help to hide up Charley Linden.

A shrill female voice was heard outside in argument with a man's low, deprecatory tones.

Presently, a sharp knock at her parlour-

door made Mrs. Toddles start, and before she could say "Come in," a very handsome, imperious-looking lady, about thirty, stalked in, followed by an elderly, gentlemanly-looking man, about fifty-eight.

"Pray, have you seen Master Linden, woman?" said the lady, fire flashing from her sharp, black eyes, while her pretty, delicate, but aquiline nose, and her compressed scarlet lips, revealed the vixen.

"*Mrs. Toddles*, my dear love! that is the name of Charley's foster-mother."

"Well, then, *Mrs. Toddles*," said the step-mother, "will you answer my question? Have you seen Master Linden either last evening or to-day?"

Mrs. Toddles had a spirit, and Mrs. Linden's manner was very aggressive and insulting, and more than this, Mrs. Toddles loved Charley, her foster-child, dearly, and felt extreme disgust and anger at the cruelties of his step-mother, and the malignant influence

she had always exercised over her husband to the detriment of his only son by his first wife.

Mrs. Toddles, therefore, though she had risen when Mr. and Mrs. Linden entered, and had set chairs for them, no sooner saw Mrs. Linden haughtily seat herself, raising her silk dress the while, as if she feared the contact of the very clean floor, than she resumed her seat in the arm-chair by the fire, and on Mrs. Linden's repeating her question in a raised voice, and with a heightened colour, Mrs. Toddles said, very quietly, but very gravely, too—

“When I know what your object in asking that question be, ma'am, I'll answer it—not afore.”

“There! Mr. Linden!” screamed the lady, “what do you think of that? No wonder your son's the reprobate he is, when that woman nursed him; her vulgarity and insolence were of course imbibed by him.”

"Wulgarity!" said Mrs. Toddles, "haven't nothink to do with me, ma'am. I behaves myself becoming. Them as don't, which they shall be nameless, out of respect to Mr. Linden, them's the people I calls wulgar, however fine they be dressed, and however grand they thinks themselves."

"Pray, Mr. Linden," said Mrs. Linden, "are you going to sit tamely there to hear me abused, by that low creature?"

"Don't excite yourself, my sweet love," said Mr. Linden. "Remember your delicate situation. I dare say Mrs. Toddles will be kind enough to tell us whether she has seen Charley."

"Oh, perhaps if you beg on your knees, Mr. Linden. I'm ashamed of you! But I tell you, woman, if you won't answer me, you shall answer a Detective. If you've harboured a runaway boy, you'll get your two years with hard labour."

"And what do you think you'll get, you

cruel stepmother! you! who've made that good, noble-hearted, dutiful young gentleman, as so loved his par, a runaway son; who've told all manner of stories, and trumped up all manner o' lies, to set his only parent agen him, and nagged and nagged, and lied and lied till you've made his own father beat him like a nigger or a dog, and shut him up in a cold, dark room? The day you gives I in charge for taking into my house (when druv away from yourn) the child I nussed at my buzzom, I gives you in charge! (*ooman* I'd call you, too, only there aint nothink o' the *ooman* about ye, except your finery,) for the wildest cruelty to your stepson; and when the judge sees the stripes and weals you've worked up his poor weak par to give him, it's my opinion you'll get the two years with hard labour, and may be somethink else besides. So now you've riled me so, I've told you a piece o' my mind, and you've heard the truth for onst in your life if you never did afore and

never does agen. And such a friend as the dear lady that's gone, Master Charley's mar, wor to you! why, I've heard when she took you into the house to be a sort o' companion and look a little arter that dear boy, you hadn't two gowus to yer name; and as for yer sitivation (which it's the same as my own), I thinks nothink of it. I don't believe you wor ever meant to be a mother, and God'll punish you for your croolty and artful ways."

"Mr. Linden," gasped out the enraged, almost choking stepmother, "call the police."

"Yes, call 'em, and I'll give ye in charge for worritin and ill-using that dear, good young gentleman, Master Charles."

Finding Mr. Linden (who, though very pale and trembling, did not stir) was not going for the police, Mrs. Linden went into screaming hysterics, in which state Mr. Linden half led, half carried her back into the carriage, and before he left the room he very slily,

and with a very scared and foolish look, deposited on a stool near the door a letter. No one in the little parlour stirred until the carriage had driven off, and then Charley sprang out of the cradle, and he and Our Mary jumped for joy to think he was quite safe and his stepmother gone.

Mrs. Toddles desired Charley to bring her the letter. It was addressed to herself, and enclosed was one directed—

“*Master Charles Linden.*”

That to Mrs. Toddles, and which Charley, by her desire, read aloud, ran thus—

“Mr. Linden, although he does not wish to agitate Mrs. Linden in her present delicate situation by any discussion or dispute on the subject, is much obliged to Mrs. Toddles for her kindness to his poor boy. The police have found out for him that his son took refuge with his foster-mother; and though Mr. Linden has concealed his knowledge of that fact from Mrs. Linden, yet he is very much comforted to think it is so. Mr. Linden begs Mrs. Toddles to give the enclosed to his son, and to accept his best thanks for her kindness to her foster-child.”

To Charles he said—

“MY POOR DEAR BOY,—I am very sorry I punished you so severely, for I have ascertained that your mamma was wrong in thinking it was you that put a live lobster into her bed and tied a string across the room to upset her. Cook has found out that Mortimer, the page your mamma discharged last week, and who now lives next door, slipped in, while we were out, to play those wicked tricks. Your uncle, Dr. Linden, has been to see me to-day, and as your mamma was out, I told him all, and he has very kindly offered to let you live with him for a time at Henley-on-Thames, where you were so happy one summer, some years ago. He will expect you the day after to-morrow. I will send your things down to Henley, and I enclose a ten-pound note for your journey, pocket-money, and things you may want. Give your foster-mother two sovereigns as a little return for her great kindness. Be a good boy, and try to love your mamma. She is very glad you should go to your uncle's, and with my love and blessing, I am, your affectionate father,

CHARLES LINDEN.

“Your uncle's address is Woodbine Villa, Henley-on-Thames. He will see to your education. Write to me, directing to my club, the Athenæum, Pall-mall.

“Don't say a word against your mamma to your uncle. Least said soonest mended.”


“I'm sure I'm much obliged to your par,”

said Mrs. Toddles, "and the money'll come in very handy ; and it's a good thing for you, Master Charley, to go to your uncle."

" Oh, yes, I shall have a pony to ride on, and all sorts of fine things. But what's the matter with Our Mary ?"

Poor child ! she was weeping to think that her friend and protector Charley was going away, and that she could not go with him.


But when the kind-hearted, generous boy tried to comfort them (for Rosy was crying too) with promises of coming to see them, and of getting his uncle to let him invite them to see him in the summer, Rosy became very merry ; Our Mary, more thoughtful, more loving, and much less selfish, drove back the tears that she saw would grieve Charley in his new hopes and happy prospects, but there was no smile in her large blue eyes nor on her little rosy lips ; and Charley had more sympathy just then with Rosy's high spirits, pranks, and glee than



with Our Mary's quiet sorrow and watchful, mournful glance.


The day for Charley's departure soon came. Poor Mrs. Toddles was wonderfully "cheered up" by what she called a godsend (namely, the two sovereigns), and Charley went off in high spirits, new clothes (Mrs. Toddles went with him to buy them), and a great deal of money in his pocket. He had bought two very pretty dolls in the Lowther Arcade for Our Mary and Rosy. Rosy was already quite engrossed by her doll. It was very gaily dressed, and Rosy already loved finery; but Our Mary only cared for hers for the giver's sake.

She did not take much notice of it till Charley was off. Indeed, he thought Rosy the more grateful of the two; but when he was quite gone Our Mary shed some very hot, large tears over her doll, while Rosy was beating hers because it would not stand upright.



Mrs. Toddles was grown very fond of Our Mary, who made herself extremely useful in a variety of ways, and exercised a most salutary influence over Rosy. Mrs. Toddles was no gossip; she never talked to her neighbours about her affairs. So many of her children were out at service, that there was plenty of room for little Mary, and no one took much notice of the presence of a strange child in Mrs. Toddles' house, particularly as the little girl's great dread of seeing Moonlight Meg again, if she ventured out, made her afraid to show herself even at the door when she could help it.

Mrs. Toddles then decided to let Our Mary stay until her husband came back to "select an opinion for her;" and in return for her kindness, and the shelter and food she received, Our Mary was a daughter to her kind protectress.



CHAPTER XX.

Yet, spite of all that nature did
To make his uncouth form forbid,
This creature dared to love.

OLD BALLAD.

WE have said that Mrs. Bussel had set her heart on discovering the secret which she felt sure was connected with Gaspar Mountjoy's abode at one of the smart little villas at Woodurstville.

One autumnal evening, she had made some excuse for coming down to spend a few days at the Court.

She determined, being extremely tormented

by her unsatisfied curiosity, to walk over to Woodhurstville and reconnoitre. She did not wish to attract attention, and therefore she put on an old garden bonnet and cloak of Mrs. Lackaday's, and stepped out very quietly across the park and through the plantation. At the end of the plantation was a footpath which led to Woodhurstville, and directly she reached it, she saw footsteps (for it had rained the day before, and the ground was moist), and in these footmarks she recognised the shape of Gaspar Mountjoy's boot. There was nothing wonderful in this, for he was often backwards and forwards, but the more open and the shorter way for him to have taken would have been the high road.

She was speculating with the vulgar curiosity of a little mind on this, when her sharp eye lighted on a note which had evidently been dropped. She picked it up. It was directed—" *Gaspar Mountjoy, Esq., Highshot Villa, Woodhurstville.*"

The seal was broken—it had evidently been read.

Mrs. Bussel had not much delicacy, and very little honour; but even she was obliged to call sophistry to her aid to excuse her reading this note; and this she did by pretending to herself that she ought to see whether it contained any intelligence which an aunt ought to make herself mistress of. It was in a female hand.

Mrs. Bussel opened the note. It said:—

“As you are so very anxious for secrecy, I will not visit you till dusk this evening. At eight o’clock expect me. There must then be no hesitation, no delay, no flinching; all will depend on nerve, courage, endurance. Mind that everything is ready. He will not arrive till half-past eight. It depends on you alone to let us make you the happiest of men.


“ELIZA WOOD.”

“How fortunate I came this way,” said Mrs. Bussel to herself, “and how providential that Gaspar dropped that designing hussey’s note. I don’t care about the late dinner to-day,

I had such an excellent luncheon of cold sirloin and apple-tart ; so I'll fathom this mystery somehow. It's now half-past seven ; that baggage will be at Gaspar's at eight. I'll hide about among the rocks until she's there. And the 'he'—I wonder who he is? Her father or brother, perhaps, coming to bully Gaspar into marrying her—a fine thing indeed! What would sister Mountjoy do and say! and he likely to be the only male descendant of Woodhurst of Woodhurst—for I don't believe that melancholy Mina will ever marry. It's my duty to my sister, my family, and the rash boy himself, to find out all about it."

Mrs. Bussel "kept herself dark," as she said, until she saw a woman in black arrive at Gaspar's door. The door was opened at once, and she slipped in. This Mrs. Bussel saw from her hiding-place among the rocks.

In about half an hour, a tall, mustachioed, cloaked, fierce-looking man was also admitted.



Mrs. Bussel then crept round, slid into Gaspar's little garden, and hid herself among some bushes close to his sitting-room window. By this time it was getting dark, and the stars were coming out. The curtains were drawn, and the blinds were down, but there was a little space between the edge of the curtain and the wood-work on one side, and Mrs. Bussel, climbing up a pear-tree which was nailed against the wall outside, peeped through this little crevice. The window was three feet from the ground.

What does sharp, red-faced Mrs. Bussel see, that a cry escapes her? Her cheeks, and even her-snipe like nose grow pale, and she shudders and trembles, yet gazes on with distended eyes and a beating heart.

She saw Gaspar Mountjoy seated on a stool in the middle of the room, his coat and waist-coat off, and his mis-shapen body encased in a sort of iron corset, which the female in black (a nurse-like woman) was helping a foreign,

mustachioed quack to screw up to a certain point, with a view to the reduction of the hump on Mountjoy's back. She saw Gaspar, ghastly pale, raise imploring eyes to the resolute charlatan, and she thought his white lips said, "I cannot bear it," but she distinctly heard the quack say—

"*Courage*, and you no longer be lame Vulcan, but one Apollo, and no lady but will smile upon you den! *Courage!* one more screw, den de hump be no more, and we gib one leetle turn to de lame leg!"

So saying, he unrolled before the pain-dimmed eyes of the livid Gaspar a paper, on which, in very large letters, black and red, was printed—

"HOPE FOR THE HUNCHBACK! THE HALT AND THE LAME RENDERED AGILE AND GRACEFUL!—*Doctor Antonio, of Milan, by the aid of a grand discovery of his own, and of his iron corset and hip-screw, undertakes, for the sum of ten guineas, to remove any deformity, of however*

long standing. Courage and entire confidence on the part of the patient are all that is requisite. An experienced female attendant accompanies Doctor Antonio. Double fees required if patients reside in the country."

Mrs. Bussel read this puff from her hiding-place.

"Poor Gaspar," she said to herself, "what a fool he is to be gulled in that way. Twenty guineas to those impostors, and all for nothing! No doctor in the world could remove his hump or cure his lameness. Ah, I see through it all now! I remember from a boy how he pined to be loved, and cursed his hunch and his lameness when all the girls preferred Oswald Egerton, and how he doubly cursed Egerton for having made him a crook-back and a cripple! and now he's in love with Ladybird, and he's seen this quack's puff, and fancies it's all true, and that he'll get rid of his hump and his limp, and that Ladybird 'll love him!"

At this moment the doctor and the nurse rushed up to Gaspar. The last screw sent the blood to his heart, and he swooned away.

CHAPTER XXI.

I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul.


SHAKESPEARE.

It was as Mrs. Bussel suspected. Gaspar Mountjoy, shrewd enough in all other matters, was blinded by vanity and passion in this affair of the iron corset, the hip-screw, and the impudent quack, Dr. Antonio. An ardent, ever-haunting desire for the love of woman had been his bane from boyhood, and bitter was his rage against fate and Oswald Egerton, against his hump, himself, and all woman-

kind, when he found that his crooked back and limping gait prevented his obtaining the preference of any young and lovely girl in his own rank of life. It was worse still when his adoration of the sex was exchanged for an intense and almost insane passion for one of its brightest ornaments. It was when he was almost in despair that Dr. Antonio's puff met his eye, and he resolved that no amount of bodily anguish or expense should prevent his getting rid of these curses of his life—his hump and his lameness.

Dr. Antonio, a base and impudent impostor, put him to excruciating torture and considerable expense, and then decamped, leaving him, of course, not one iota the better as regarded his deformity, but his health much injured by the agony he had endured with so much fortitude.


Mrs. Bussel had watched till she had seen the iron corset and the hip-screw removed and the unhappy man restored to life. That was



Dr. Antonio's last visit, and as Mrs. Bussel was not all evil, and something in this effort to obtain the form that might win woman's love touched her heart, she did not hasten to betray the secret she had discovered. She often visited the villa to ascertain whether the vile quack had reappeared, but he came no more. Instead of a visit, he sent Gaspar a letter, in which he threw the blame of failure on the obstinacy of Gaspar's hump, not on any want of skill in himself, or truth in his system, and Gaspar found himself minus some eighty pounds, and with the sense of having suffered a martyrdom, and been completely gulled.

He kept his bed for six weeks, and then he reappeared at the Court, and Mina, who had missed his kind attentions, was very glad to see him again. She had never spoken to him of the two great sorrows that still, in spite of outward composure, cast their black shadows over her path of life—the death of Oswald Egerton and the abduction of her

little *protégée*, Our Mary. The latter seemed to haunt her the most perseveringly because the child's fate was uncertain. It was impossible to conceive what the little one's sufferings might be at that very moment when Mina was thinking of her, or sitting by the fire, looking into its red embers, as if therein lay the secret. Had she been certain that Mary was dead, she might have become resigned. We *must* resign ourselves to the irrevocable, and with regard to Oswald Egerton, after months of passionate anguish, Mina seemed to have wept away her grief; but now that she had regained her power of acting and thinking, she was tormented by a desire to be doing something to discover Our Mary's fate, to be taking some steps for the recovery of the poor little lost one. She did not dare allude, before her father, to the subject that was preying upon her mind, but she could not quite disguise her longing to be taking some steps for the recovery of Our Mary from Gaspar Mountjoy.



She had almost made up her mind to consult him on the subject, when one day that she was about to practise in the large hall upon the organ, which was placed in an antique gallery, she found on the music-desk a piece of parchment, old, yellow, and smelling very musty, and on it, in old English letters, was written—

“If Mina Woodhurst has courage to visit the Blue Chamber, alone, at twelve o’clock to-night, she will learn something connected with the fate of Oswald Egerton and of Our Mary.”

Mina turned very pale, and hid the parchment in her bosom, when she thought she heard a step, but it was fancy; no one ever entered the gallery but herself—no one else ever opened the organ.

Mina trembled violently as, rushing to an oriel window, she examined this mysterious message. Whence could it come? What could it mean? What mortal could know aught of her secret fear, of her vain longing for

Our Mary? who take this means of communicating with her? Could the invisible world really take cognisance of a mortal's grief?—really communicate with a mortal?

The melancholy and anxious mind easily becomes superstitious, and Mina remembered all the Mayflowers and Phœbe's mother had said about the Ghost of the Blue Chamber, and their conviction that he had spirited Our Mary away.

"I *will* visit the Blue Chamber at twelve o'clock," she said to herself. "What have I to fear? I cannot be more wretched than I am." Then, quoting *Hamlet*, she murmured—

"My life, I do not set a pin's fee,
And for my soul, what can it do to that,
Being a thing immortal as itself?"

All day Mina was in a state of secret agitation. She shunned the presence of her aunt and Ladybird. She pleaded indisposition, and shut herself up in her own room.

Mr. Woodhurst was in London, so were the

Bussels. Gaspar, too, had called in the morning to ask if the ladies had any commands, as he was going to town at once for a week.


It seemed an age till everything was quiet, doors and shutters secured for the night, and lights and fires put out.

At eleven all was still, and by a quarter to twelve no one was awake at Woodhurst Court save Mina.

Her heart beat very quick. She was deadly pale, but quite resolved. She knew where the key of the old wing hung. She quietly left her room, noiselessly stepped across the corridor, a lamp in her hand, seized the key, and opened the door of another long passage that led to the Blue Chamber. The wind closed the door behind her, and extinguished her lamp, but the moonbeams, cold and blue, stole through round holes in the shutters, and lighted up the grim faces of old Woodhursts and their dames empanelled in the walls.

On she sped. She was in a strange, exalted, excited state, scarcely conscious of bodily feeling—all mind, all soul! She felt awe, but no fear. She has reached the door of the Blue Chamber. With a desperate resolve she turns the key, the door opens, a wild cry bursts from her lips, her limbs grow cold and rigid, her eyeballs start from their sockets!

Why is she thus paralysed? What does she see?



CHAPTER XXII.


Art thou a spirit of health,
Or goblin damned ?

SHAKESPEARE.

WE left Mina standing transfixed with horror, terror, and amazement on the threshold of the dressing room of the "Blue Chamber." This small apartment communicated by a glass door with what was commonly called the Haunted Room. It was what in the olden time was denominated a light closet, but was what we should now simply call a dressing-room. Directly opposite the glass door, but inside, in the Blue Chamber, hung

the full-length portrait of that Woodhurst of Woodhurst, the Cavalier of Charles's time, who had been murdered by a Puritan lover of his sister's. Generally, some faded old blue silk blinds that met in the middle half-way up the glass door, and which could be drawn or undrawn at pleasure, concealed the greater part of the Blue Chamber; but, as Mina gazed with horror on a sort of ghastly ight that filled the inner room, the blinds were withdrawn, and that by no visible hand. Mina, glancing wildly into the Blue Chamber, there saw what she believed to be the form of her murdered ancestor, in his blue Court suit of the time of Charles the Second, with the long, flowing auburn hair, the crimson gash across the throat, the Spanish hat and plume pulled down over the pale face, the deformed figure, the ruffles, red-heeled shoes, and sword.


The figure stepped down from the frame in the shadow at the further extremity of what



had been the State bed-chamber, and, turning his crooked back upon her, proceeded with a long, white wand to conjure up a sort of phantasmagoria, on which Mina gazed.

The first scene that appeared on what seemed to be an expanse of snowy white, was the collision of two steamers on a vast river. This scene, then, almost in the manner of dissolving views, changed or melted into the wreck of both steamers, and that scene in its turn, to the vision of one figure—that of a “strong swimmer in his agony,” who sank to rise no more, and Mina cried aloud in wild despair, “Oswald Egerton!”

The scene changed to a London street, and a little girl, wasted and wan, but in whom Mina recognised Our Mary, was lying on a door-step asleep. In the next scene a figure appeared, deformed and limping. It is—it must be—Gaspar Mountjoy! He raised Our Mary in his arms. In the following one he is seen restoring her to a weeping lady, in




whom Mina beholds herself. In the last scene Gaspar Mountjoy kneels to this vision of Mina, Our Mary joins ther hands, and the phantasmagoria is at an end.

Mina still stood gazing intently, when the figure of her ancestor seemed to be moving slowly towards her. At the horror she felt all self-possession forsook her ; she uttered a piercing scream, and sank lifeless on the floor.

How long she remained there she never knew. When she came to herself she was lying on, not in, her own bed. Her first impression when she awoke (the morning sun pouring his rays through the window which she had herself unshrouded to look at the moon at night) was that she had had some hideous dream or frightful nightmare.

She was very cold, her limbs ached, she shivered, and felt very ill. She contrived to get into bed, and endeavoured to banish all that she had seen from her mind as an idle, horrible dream ; but she could not do it. The



more she dwelt on it the more convinced she was that she had been into the so-called Haunted Wing, and had seen events past and present shadowed forth by the Ghost of the Blue Chamber. She felt in her bosom for the mysterious parchment which contained the invitation, that had induced her to visit the Haunted Wing. It was gone !

Mina (like *Hamlet*) was in a very morbid state of mind, and “out of her weakness and her melancholy”—as *he* (the evil one) “is very potent with such spirits”—it might be that some influence was working out her destruction. All she could deduce from what she had seen was the certainty that Oswald Egerton was drowned ; that little Mary was a beggar in the streets of London ; that Gaspar Mountjoy was destined to find and to restore the child to her ; and that her own hand was to be the reward.

“Oh ! that it were indeed a dream !” she said to herself, as she tossed about in the

restlessness of incipient fever. "I cannot marry Gaspar; and yet my doing so may be the condition of my recovering little Mary. Poor child! how wasted, how wan she looked, asleep on that cold stone step! Oh! horrible, too horrible! Yet I dread the very thought of wedding Gaspar! Oh! save me, save me!"

By degrees the fever gained ground. Mina lay, burning hot, with a very rapid pulse, eyes on fire, parched lips, a raging thirst, and thoughts wildly confused. Yes, Mina lay talking incoherently about the Ghost of the Blue Chamber, raving of Oswald, Our Mary, and Gaspar Mountjoy. And when Aunt Tabby, surprised at her non-appearance at the breakfast table, came to inquire the cause, she found her in a brain fever, and, of course, quite delirious. In that alarming state Mina rambled on about Oswald Egerton, the sea, and the shipwreck, and called on all around her to save her Oswald—her love—her loving

She had almost made up her mind to consult him on the subject, when one day that she was about to practise in the large hall upon the organ, which was placed in an antique gallery, she found on the music-desk a piece of parchment, old, yellow, and smelling very musty, and on it, in old English letters, was written—

“If Mina Woodhurst has courage to visit the Blue Chamber, alone, at twelve o'clock to-night, she will learn something connected with the fate of Oswald Egerton and of Our Mary.”

Mina turned very pale, and hid the parchment in her bosom, when she thought she heard a step, but it was fancy; no one ever entered the gallery but herself—no one else ever opened the organ.

Mina trembled violently as, rushing to an oriel window, she examined this mysterious message. Whence could it come? What could it mean? What mortal could know aught of her secret fear, of her vain longing for

Our Mary? who take this means of communicating with her? Could the invisible world really take cognisance of a mortal's grief?—really communicate with a mortal?

The melancholy and anxious mind easily becomes superstitious, and Mina remembered all the Mayflowers and Phœbe's mother had said about the Ghost of the Blue Chamber, and their conviction that he had spirited Our Mary away.

“I *will* visit the Blue Chamber at twelve o'clock,” she said to herself. “What have I to fear? I cannot be more wretched than I am.” Then, quoting *Hamlet*, she murmured—

“My life, I do not set a pin's fee,
And for my soul, what can it do to that,
Being a thing immortal as itself?”

All day Mina was in a state of secret agitation. She shunned the presence of her aunt and Ladybird. She pleaded indisposition, and shut herself up in her own room.

Mr. Woodhurst was in London, so were the

Bussels. Gaspar, too, had called in the morning to ask if the ladies had any commands, as he was going to town at once for a week.

It seemed an age till everything was quiet, doors and shutters secured for the night, and lights and fires put out.

At eleven all was still, and by a quarter to twelve no one was awake at Woodhurst Court save Mina.

Her heart beat very quick. She was deadly pale, but quite resolved. She knew where the key of the old wing hung. She quietly left her room, noiselessly stepped across the corridor, a lamp in her hand, seized the key, and opened the door of another long passage that led to the Blue Chamber. The wind closed the door behind her, and extinguished her lamp, but the moonbeams, cold and blue, stole through round holes in the shutters, and lighted up the grim faces of old Woodhursts and their dames empanelled in the walls.

On she sped. She was in a strange, exalted, excited state, scarcely conscious of bodily feeling—all mind, all soul! She felt awe, but no fear. She has reached the door of the Blue Chamber. With a desperate resolve she turns the key, the door opens, a wild cry bursts from her lips, her limbs grow cold and rigid, her eyeballs start from their sockets!

Why is she thus paralysed? What does she see?

CHAPTER XXII.

Art thou a spirit of health,
Or goblin damned ?

SHAKESPEARE.

WE left Mina standing transfixed with horror, terror, and amazement on the threshold of the dressing room of the "Blue Chamber." This small apartment communicated by a glass door with what was commonly called the Haunted Room. It was what in the olden time was denominated a light closet, but was what we should now simply call a dressing-room. Directly opposite the glass door, but inside, in the Blue Chamber, hung

the full-length portrait of that Woodhurst of Woodhurst, the Cavalier of Charles's time, who had been murdered by a Puritan lover of his sister's. Generally, some faded old blue silk blinds that met in the middle half-way up the glass door, and which could be drawn or undrawn at pleasure, concealed the greater part of the Blue Chamber; but, as Mina gazed with horror on a sort of ghastly light that filled the inner room, the blinds were withdrawn, and that by no visible hand. Mina, glancing wildly into the Blue Chamber, there saw what she believed to be the form of her murdered ancestor, in his blue Court suit of the time of Charles the Second, with the long, flowing auburn hair, the crimson gash across the throat, the Spanish hat and plume pulled down over the pale face, the deformed figure, the ruffles, red-heeled shoes, and sword.

The figure stepped down from the frame in the shadow at the further extremity of what

had been the State bed-chamber, and, turning his crooked back upon her, proceeded with a long, white wand to conjure up a sort of phantasmagoria, on which Mina gazed.

The first scene that appeared on what seemed to be an expanse of snowy white, was the collision of two steamers on a vast river. This scene, then, almost in the manner of dissolving views, changed or melted into the wreck of both steamers, and that scene in its turn, to the vision of one figure—that of a “strong swimmer in his agony,” who sank to rise no more, and Mina cried aloud in wild despair, “Oswald Egerton !”

The scene changed to a London street, and a little girl, wasted and wan, but in whom Mina recognised Our Mary, was lying on a door-step asleep. In the next scene a figure appeared, deformed and limping. It is—it must be—Gaspar Mountjoy ! He raised Our Mary in his arms. In the following one he is seen restoring her to a weeping lady, in

whom Mina beholds herself. In the last scene Gaspar Mountjoy kneels to this vision of Mina, Our Mary joins ther hands, and the phantasmagoria is at an end.

Mina still stood gazing intently, when the figure of her ancestor seemed to be moving slowly towards her. At the horror she felt all self-possession forsook her ; she uttered a piercing scream, and sank lifeless on the floor.

How long she remained there she never knew. When she came to herself she was lying on, not in, her own bed. Her first impression when she awoke (the morning sun pouring his rays through the window which she had herself unshrouded to look at the moon at night) was that she had had some hideous dream or frightful nightmare.

She was very cold, her limbs ached, she shivered, and felt very ill. She contrived to get into bed, and endeavoured to banish all that she had seen from her mind as an idle, horrible dream ; but she could not do it. The

more she dwelt on it the more convinced she was that she had been into the so-called Haunted Wing, and had seen events past and present shadowed forth by the Ghost of the Blue Chamber. She felt in her bosom for the mysterious parchment which contained the invitation, that had induced her to visit the Haunted Wing. It was gone !

Mina (like *Hamlet*) was in a very morbid state of mind, and “out of her weakness and her melancholy”—as *he* (the evil one) “is very potent with such spirits”—it might be that some influence was working out her destruction. All she could deduce from what she had seen was the certainty that Oswald Egerton was drowned ; that little Mary was a beggar in the streets of London ; that Gaspar Mountjoy was destined to find and to restore the child to her ; and that her own hand was to be the reward.

“Oh ! that it were indeed a dream !” she said to herself, as she tossed about in the

restlessness of incipient fever. "I cannot marry Gaspar; and yet my doing so may be the condition of my recovering little Mary. Poor child! how wasted, how wan she looked, asleep on that cold stone step! Oh! horrible, too horrible! Yet I dread the very thought of wedding Gaspar! Oh! save me, save me!"

By degrees the fever gained ground. Mina lay, burning hot, with a very rapid pulse, eyes on fire, parched lips, a raging thirst, and thoughts wildly confused. Yes, Mina lay talking incoherently about the Ghost of the Blue Chamber, raving of Oswald, Our Mary, and Gaspar Mountjoy. And when Aunt Tabby, surprised at her non-appearance at the breakfast table, came to inquire the cause, she found her in a brain fever, and, of course, quite delirious. In that alarming state Mina rambled on about Oswald Egerton, the sea, and the shipwreck, and called on all around her to save her Oswald—her love—her loving

one! Then she would mourn over the loss of Our Mary, and exclaim—

“See—see—there she is! wan, faint with cold and hunger—poor, poor child!—asleep on a door-step. Save her! Save her, Gaspar! Bring her to me; I will warm her in my bosom! But go! Go! Go! Come not near me. I cannot love you. You were not made to win a woman’s love! Hah! ha! ha!

“Yet spite of all that nature did
To make his uncouth form forbid,

this creature dared to love,” she would say—or rather sing, sitting up in bed; her long black hair wildly streaming over the white pillows; her large, dark eyes rolling; her beautiful cheeks flushed; wringing her white hands, clapping them, and trying to spring out of her bed, as she would say—

“Hist! hist! hist! Is it half-past twelve? If so, I must go to the Blue Chamber.”

Mr. Woodhurst, who was in town at the

time, was sent for. He brought with him the physicians most celebrated in mental maladies. They gave little hope. But, in spite of their prognostics and their efforts to get Mr. Woodhurst to consent to the removal of his beautiful and only child to a private lunatic asylum, *kept by themselves*, she, when they had retired in high dudgeon, prophesying confirmed lunacy, gradually recovered; and Ladybird, Aunt Tabby, and Gaspar Mountjoy, who had watched her with untiring devotion, were amply rewarded for all their care, when her fine face regained its mournful, calm expression, her voice its natural softness, and her manners their tender dignity and grace.

Ever since the great and double shock which Mina had received from the sudden news of Oswald Egerton's death, and of the abduction of Our Mary, her nervous system had been much weakened. The brain-fever, and the long illness that ensued, increased that debility, and any great excitement now always

although she would not discuss it in a matter of ordinary conversation with a friend on the subject, but when the subject arose caused by the doctor and father she had felt in the neighbourhood of the Blue Chamber, she talked round that any one who knew the circumstances, would have supposed possible.

Naturally in the ordinary business, impressionable temperament that predisposes to superstition she did not attempt to explain even, by any logical theory the mystery of the black-robed summons, in the old dusty parlour, which she had found in the music-room of the great hall of the still more appalling appearance of the Ghost of the Blue Chamber, and the reverberations of the phantasmagoria which he had exhibited to her. When she was well enough to think it over, and to ponder it in her mind, she felt convinced that these manifestations were vouchsafed to her to confirm the report of Oswald Egerton's death, and by conveying to her the fact that

Our Mary was still living, though in want and misery, as a little wanderer in the streets of London, to rouse her to active measures for the recovery of that beloved child. So far she admitted—but the suggestion conveyed by the closing scene, that she should reward Gaspar Mountjoy for restoring little Mary to her, by marrying him, *that* she could not contemplate for a moment. She liked him as a friend, almost as a brother, but she loathed the thought of him as a lover or a husband.

And yet she resolved to open her heart to him, and ask him to do his best, both by advice to her and active endeavours of his own, to discover the fate of Our Mary; not only to decide on the measures to be used for that sweet child's recovery, but to take upon himself the task of seeing them adopted.

It was the summer time when little Mary had been stolen away, and now it was spring, the first of May—a first of May, too, that

would have suited the Poet-Laureate of the Queen of Months, in those times when May *was* a Queen.

There was no one at Woodhurst Court just then but Aunt Tabby and Mina.

Mr. Woodhurst was very much in town, but intensely engrossed by great mercantile speculations.

Mrs. Lackaday was gone to stay with Mrs. Mountjoy (Gaspar's mother), who had been afflicted with a paralytic stroke, and though Mrs. Lackaday could be of no use to any one in that miserable state, or, indeed, in any other, yet, as Aunt Tabby could not leave Mina, and Mrs. Bussel would not leave Mr. Bussel (though he offered to do without her), Mrs. Lackaday was despatched, as better than nobody, to keep watch by her sister Mountjoy's sofa.

Mina was still very delicate, as yet only convalescent, but lovelier than ever in the almost transparent delicacy of her snow-drop

complexion, the fever flush on her cheek, and the lustre of her large black eyes.

She had resolved, as Gaspar was with his mother, to write to him and tell him how intense was her anxiety about her little *protégée*, Our Mary, and to ask him, on his return to town, to see whatever people were likely to be able to discover the child's hiding-place, and to spare no expense in advertisements and researches of all kinds. She suggested that he should apply to magistrates, lawyers, detectives, &c. &c., and offer a considerable reward for any tidings of Our Mary and the apprehension of the wretch or wretches who had trepanned her.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Thou art gone to the grave ; but we will not deplore thee,

Since God was thy refuge, thy guardian, and guide.
He gave thee, He took thee ; and soon will restore thee,
Where Death hath no sting, for the Saviour hath died.

BISHOP HEBER.

AND where is Our Mary ? where has she been during Mina's long illness and tedious convalescence ? Is she as her kind-hearted patroness beheld her in that vision or phantasmagoria in the Blue Chamber ? Is she wandering, faint with hunger, pale, footsore, wan and wasted, about the streets of London ?

No ! Mary continued to dwell with Mrs. Toddles, who—a model working-man's wife—awaited her “master's” return to “select an opinion for her,” and decide what was to be done about the little, docile, loving, gentle girl.

And when Joe did come he found his wife's heart-strings so closely twined with Our Mary's, and beheld so much that was good, both in example and precept, in the dear little girl, that he at once decided she should remain with them. He had reason to be very glad that he had come to that decision, for his two elder girls were in service, earning their own living, and when Mrs. Toddles was confined, there was no one to do anything for the little ones and himself but Our Mary.

But a great grief was lying in wait for Joe, and it was while under its paralyzing influence that Our Mary began (child though she was) to fulfil her woman mission, to watch, to wait, to soothe, to comfort.

One night, while Mrs. Toddles was still very ill in bed with a very deep-red, tiny baby by her side, Rosy complained of headache, sickness, cold shivers, and very sore throat.

“Whatever ails thee, my wench?” said Toddles; “thee looks all manner of colours, and, my eye! how thee do shake! I hope thee aint caught the fever that’s going about.”

“Hush!” said Our Mary, “hush, please, or mammy’ll hear you, and maybe get a fright, and she’s very bad herself to-day. What is it, Rosy, dear?” she whispered, as Rosy, generally so full of frolic, came and rested her burning, aching head on Our Mary’s little shoulder.

“Shall I put you to bed, Rosy,” said Our Mary, “and bring you a good hot cup of tea?”

“Yes, Mary; I am too bad to sit up,” said Rosy, and Our Mary led her into a little

inner room and undressed her, and tucked her up, and brought her some tea, all noiselessly, softly, making a sign to Mr. Toddles not to speak, and all anxiety lest her mammy, who had fallen asleep, should be disturbed or frightened.

But all little Mary's precautions were of no avail. Rosy became rapidly worse, and the two younger children were seized in the night with the same symptoms, premonitory of that terrible scourge—malignant scarlet fever.

It was impossible to conceal this dreadful disaster from the watchful mother, lying restless and excited, herself very weak and ill, in an adjoining room.

The doctor came and pronounced the disease to be all that both Mr. and Mrs. Toddles most dreaded. He advised that on no account the absent children, out at service should be sent for. He was a kind man, and suggested that Our Mary should be removed, but who could

be asked to take charge of a child coming from a house where raged malignant scarlet fever? It was not to be thought of, and Our Mary begged to be allowed to stay to nurse Rosy, and not Rosy alone—the other little ones demanded constant attention, and no nurse could be found who would venture into the infected home of the Toddles's.

Joe and little Mary were their nurses, and poor Mrs. Toddles, when she understood the terrible truth, and when the full extent of the peril burst upon her, *would* leave her bed and help to tend the little sufferers.

Rapid indeed was the progress in this poor and crowded neighbourhood of the wholesale destroyer, who is no respecter of persons, but sweeps away the cherished little ones of the rich and great as remorselessly as he does those of the ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed poor. In many a house in the Broadway and in the back streets of Westminster lay some poor

fever-stricken sufferers. Grim Death and his malignant agent went hand in hand into almost every home.

On the fifth day poor Rosy's life was despaired of. Our Mary, who loved Rosy tenderly, wept silently, and prayed inwardly by the little bed.

Mrs. Toddles had herself been taken very ill with the premonitory symptoms of scarlet fever, and the two little children were scarcely expected to live.

Joe, who so loved the wife and bairns he had worked so hard to maintain, sat by the fire, his arms folded on the table, his face hidden in those strong arms, his breast heaving convulsively beneath his fustian jacket, and blinding tears deluging his bronzed and sun-burnt face. A woman had at length been found and sent by the doctor to see to Mrs. Toddles and the baby, and she had made some tea and cut some bread and butter, and placed some of

both before the miserable Toddles, with the words—

“Cheer up, measter—don’t ’ee give way !
While there’s life there’s hope !”

Meanwhile, Our Mary, kneeling like a guardian angel by Rosy’s little pillow, saw the moon rise, and her beams steal into the room and reveal the altered features of what *had* been the chubby, ruddy, joyous, wilful Rosy.

Rosy was in a sort of comatose sleep, breathing with great difficulty, her face contracted by frequent spasms, her lips—once twin cherries—black and swollen, her skin scarlet, her hands clenched. By degrees, as little Mary watched and prayed, her simple childish prayer, that God would ease poor Rosy’s pain, a change came over this young sufferer’s face—the features relaxed—the hands unclosed—they had been clutching at the sheets—the short gasps gave way to a longer respiration. Rosy opened her eyes, and said—

“ Mary ! Our Mary, good-bye ! I’m going home !”

“ Oh. Rosy !” sobbed Mary, “ what do you mean ? aint this your home ?”

“ No ! this is a dear, dear home ! and daddy a dear, kind daddy, and mammy’s a dear, good mammy ! but I’ve a better home still, Mary, and a Father in Heaven as calls me away ; and, Mary, it’s you as has made me a good gal, and fit to go to it. I never thinkd much about Jesus and my sins, and he a-dying for to save I, till you comed here and told I if I’d been ever so bad I’d be forgived if I believed and repented ; and I does believe, I’ve seen it all in a dream, Mary, and I does repent, and I feel I’m forgived ; and it’s all owing to you, Mary. Our Mary !” she cried, “ come nearer me, nearer, bring a cotton candle. I can’t see your face. Come !” and she sat up in the bed, and wildy opened her arms. “ Come, kiss poor Rosy, and say good-bye ! Call daddy, call mammy ! Where’s Bill—

where's Nan—wherever is 'em all? I wants 'em all to know that, though I grieves to leave 'em, I feels I am but going afore! Some's afeared to die! Old Poll wos, but if she seed the things I did just now in my sleep, the Heaven opening, and angels, and Our Saviour, and all welcoming I, she'd not be afeared. I hope daddy, and mammy, and all will see what I see. Mammy! Daddy! Bill! Nan!"

No one answered the call but the poor father.

"Good-bye, daddy! All a-owing to Our Mary and what she taught me, I'm forgiven! I feels I'm forgiven, though I've often been a very bad gal to you and mammy, and shouldn't never have been no other, maybe, if Our Mary hadn't come, and then I tried to copy she, and she told me about things I've heard of at school, but I never think'd serious about all that's in the Testament, and now I

sees it all clear, so clear, daddy. I go to Jesus—good-bye—bless all—bless Our Mary!” With those words Rosy fell back on her pillow, and her penitent, pardoned, and trusting spirit passed away.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The first dark day of nothingness—

The last of danger and distress.

;

BYRON.

YES; all who had been stricken with this fever died, and so did many, many more in other little houses of crowded Westminster—all fell victims to this terrible epidemic.

Death is seldom satisfied with one victim, and when his prime minister is malignant scarlet fever, he often carries off a whole family at once.

Not only little Rosy died, but all who were

stricken at the same time—the two little ones, Mrs. Toddles, and, finally, the tiny, crimson baby. Toddles was almost broken-hearted and quite cast down, when he saw his once wilful, ruddy, chubby, little Rosy in her last long sleep, her little white shroud decked with flowers by Our Mary's loving, gentle hand ; and that sweet child, pale, tearful, but with a heavenly smile, sitting at the head of Rosy's little bed ; and when he, strong man, knelt down and laid his shaggy head on the cold, still breast of his little daughter, Our Mary would creep to his side, and whilst her tears fell like rain on his matted locks, she would say—

“ Don't cry for Rosy ; she is happy now ; look, how she smiles ; look, daddy ! ”

Toddles' little ones died calmly, peaceably, quite unconscious of the great change that awaited them—they were too young to have sinned grievously, and the sting of death is sin.

At the Pear Street Ragged School they had learnt to lisp the Saviour's name, and they fell asleep, to wake in His bosom.

Toddles followed Rosy and his two little ones to their graves. Little Mary, dressed in a black frock, cape, and hood, sent her by the doctor's wife, walking by his side, her little hand in his—he was convulsed with grief.

She wept quietly, and looked, as she stood by the small graves, like a little sorrowing angel, weeping over the children of earth. But the sorrow he felt when Rosy and the two little ones were taken away was nothing to that which seemed to rend his heart from his bosom when his wife—his true, good-hearted wife, his first and only love—was called away ! His agony of despair was so tempestuous that the doctor feared his reason would give way.

Poor Mrs. Toddles died resigned, and full of faith in that Redeemer she had loved and served ; but even to her the parting with her husband was a harrowing scene.

She was acutely conscious to the last. The dread that he, her "measter," would marry again, and *her* children have a stepmother like Mrs. Linden, came vividly before her. She did not know that, of those children, all whom such an event could seriously affect, had preceded her on the unknown journey through the dark gates to that better land, where those who have believed in Jesus, and lived in accordance with His precepts, are welcomed by angels into their Father's kingdom; and however humble they may have been on earth, are of those jewels of which He makes up his crown.

In his intense love and passionate despair poor Toddles offered to promise his dying wife never to marry again.

But her love was wiser than his, and she said, laying her now thin, white hand on his—

"No, dear husband. No! Thee aint used to be alone. Thee must have some one to see

to thee, and do for thee ; and if thee don't marry some tidy body——”

Here her sobs choked her. She could not bear the picture she had conjured up.

“ I can never abide another in thy place, woife,” said Toddles. “ ’Taint loikely, and I’s got Our Mary to see to I, and for thought, and handy, tidy ways, the little wench is worth all the woives I ever seed—barring thee ! Let me promise thee to keep single ? Do ye, now, do ye. Thee’ll be asier in thee dear heart, maybe.”

“ No, Toddles, no, measter, don’t tempt me more nor I can bear,” said the poor dying woman. “ I won’t bind thee. Thee aint one to break thy word, and if thee wants to marry, and can’t ’cos of thy promise to I, thee’d maybe turn agin me in my grave, and I’d have anger dead that never angered thee living, measter ; and thee can’t lie alone. Thee’d be so cold o’ winter nights.”

Here a tempest of half-jealous agony

shook the poor wife, and Toddles again said—

“Let me swear to thee none shall ever sit in thy chair, nor lie in thy place, as my woife?”

“No,” she said at length. “No! I’ll maybe bring thee into wild, gay ways, but if thee do marry, choose one as’ll be good to the children, not a gay, dressy, vain young thing, but a tidy, steady gal, with the fear o’ God before her eyes; and now kneel down and pray with me a bit, and God’s will be done.”

Toddles complied. He held her hands. He felt her grasp tighten and then relax.

“I’m going,” she cried. “Good-bye, measter. Love to Charley Linden. Bring the children. Good-bye!”

He caught her in his arms—she was gone!

CHAPTER XXV.

Thou art gone to thy grave, and its mansion forsaking,
Perhaps thy tried spirit in doubt lingered long!
But the sunshine of Heaven was bright at thy waking,
And the song that thou heardest was the Seraphim's song.
BISHOP HEBER.

THEY are all in their quiet graves—the good wife and tender mother, the infant of days by her side, and three little mounds near her, tenanted by Rosy and the two younger children.

In the late bustling, active scene, the home alive with merry voices and the ruddy faces of children, a sorrow-bowed man sits by a

yet bright fire, and a clean, nicely-swept hearth, and a little angel-faced girl, her long golden ringlets falling on her white shoulders and black frock, goes noiselessly to and fro in the now silent house, and sees to everything—a little girl of eight years old, in size and looks a child; a woman in forethought, industry, and love. She lays the clean, coarse cloth, she places upon it the simple dinner, she leans her sweet face for a moment against Toddles' brown cheek, and says—

“Come, daddy, dinner's ready, and thee's a-going back to thy work, and must eat a bit, or thee'll turn sick and giddy as thee did afore! It's fried steak and onions, daddy, and thee wor so fond of that—don't it smell temptatious?”

And at that little, gentle voice, the great, strong working-man struggles with his tears.

“Bless thee—bless thee, Our Mary!” he says, as she puts her little hand in his (rough with hard work) and leads him to the table,

and seats him there, and he bows his head while she folds her little rosy hands, and says her simple grace, and then she helps him to the best of what she has provided and cooked, and tries to cheer him with her simple prattle.

Things went on thus for some time. Toddles' elder children, all out in service, were not allowed by their masters, their mistresses, and the doctor to come where the deadly infection might still linger. And all this time Toddles had no one to cheer, to help, to comfort, to see to him, or to do for him, but Our Mary, assisted by the occasional attendance of an old charwoman, who, in Mrs. Toddles' time, came regularly once a week to wash, clean, and help. This old charwoman (Mrs. Grimms) had a daughter—a handsome girl, with black eyes, white teeth, a smart figure, a trim waist, a neat ankle, and a ready tongue, and latterly, Mrs. Grimms, a martyr to what she called the *rheumatiz*, had sent this girl, who had been brought up as a dress-

maker, but made little by her trade, 'to do for Toddles.'

Toddles was a fine-looking man, of six and thirty; Gertrude Grimms was a showy, dressy, very merry girl, or rather woman, of five-and-twenty. "She *could*," as her mother said of her, "do a day's work with any girl." The only question was, whether she *would* do it. At any rate, she was willing and active, and obliging enough at Toddles's. The result may be easily foreseen.

A year and a-half after Toddles lost his good wife, he went to church with Gertrude Grimms. It was a very good match for her—was it so for him? He was a capital workman, and earned on an average a pound a week. He had money in the savings'-bank, and the little shop still went on, attended to principally by Our Mary. Toddles was, therefore, a great catch for a dressmaker who liked ease, good-living, and gossip better than her needle, and who had reached the critical

age of twenty-five without one offer of marriage.

Her own mother said, over her gin-laced tea, to a sister charwoman—

“He’ll find out he’s caught a Tartar; but I’m thankful to be rid of her. She’s led me a fine life since she wor a little ’un. He’ve pleased his eye and plagued his heart, he have, for she’s a regular ‘cure’ is Gerty, though I says it as shouldn’t, seeing I’m her mother.”

At first, Gerty, as she was called, was all smiles and good-humour and little attentions, and if anything went wrong, if dinner was not ready, or his buttons were off his shirt—which had never been the case in his first wife’s time, or even when Our Mary had the management—Gerty would smile so sweetly, her coral lips disclosing such white, even teeth, and such soft dimples forming in her peach-like cheeks, that Toddles could not bear to scold, sadden, or anger her. She was very glad at first of Our Mary’s help, and rather disposed

to make a drudge of the gentle, willing, handy child; but she soon became jealous of her too, and began to wish for a full-grown servant who would call her "missus," and not expect to sit with them at the table, or be thought so much of by Toddles.

When once those two feelings, jealousy and ambition (the ambition to have a servant of her own), had taken possession of her weak head and proud heart, she began to try to set Toddles against Our Mary, to talk of the union as the best place for such brats—of Charity beginning at home. She called the child a Methody for her pious habits and love of the Bible, and when Toddles was away, she was often very cross, and even cruel to Our Mary. She would slap the sweet face fiercely for no offence, pull her long golden curls, of which she was very jealous, as her own thick, black, horsehair-like tresses would not curl, and say "she knew where she would be, and should be, before long, and where all

them rat's tails would be clipped short enough, and small shame to them as done it, if any, and no loss to no one."

Mary was very unhappy now at Toddles', but she never complained. She would not make mischief, or cause words, as she said to herself. She felt bitterly, now, that she was an orphan, ALONE IN THE WORLD, but she looked to Heaven, and found a Father there.

Charley Linden had written very affectionately when he heard of his foster-mother's death, and his letter was washed with tears as he spoke of Rosy, the little ones, and his kind mammy. His letter was to Our Mary, who (a very good scholar) had written him word of all the sad disasters at home. He had added that his uncle had been much pleased with her pretty little letter, and had said that in the hay-making season he would come with Charley to see Our Mary, and bring her to Henley on a visit.

This letter had greatly enraged the new

Mrs. Toddles, who, though she wished to be rid of Our Mary, was jealous of any favour shown to the little, lonely, loving girl.

One day, towards evening, Mrs. Toddles, very lazy herself, had had her mother (old Mrs. Grimms) to wash and clean up, and a clothes-line being required, and some gin (both old Grimms and her daughter were very fond of gin) being wanted too, Mrs. Toddles said to Our Mary, who was reading the "Pilgrim's Progress" by the firelight—

"Come, Moll, stir your stumps, can't ye? Get out of there; you're always a reading, you are!"

"I've only read a little bit to-day, ma'am" (Gerty had insisted on Our Mary calling her ma'am), "and not then, till I'd done all my work."

"Don't answer me, you little hussey!" said Mrs. Toddles. "To look at ye, one 'ud think butter wouldn't melt in your mouth, and yet cheese wouldn't choke ye! for all that copy o'

your countenance, I never could make out why you aint to go on no arrants."

"Please, ma'am, it's because daddy's afraid Moonlight Meg might get hold of me again and catch me up," said Our Mary, tears filling her eyes.

"Stuff a-nonsense," said Gerty; "she'd soon set you down again. You aint no sich catch, I can tell ye. But don't squat there a-flying in my face, or I'll box your ears for ye, ye owdacious little beggar! Take that ere bottle and this here shilling, and buy ten-pennorth of gin at the 'Palmerston' public over the way, and a twopenny clothes-line round the corner in Dark Street, and mind you're back in no time, or I'll bang ye a good un!"

"And if she don't, I will, my lass," said old Mrs. Grimms, taking a huge pinch of snuff. She shared her daughter's love for gin, and jealous, grudging hatred of Our Mary.

“There’s the shilling and there’s the bottle, Moll,” said Mrs. Toddles. “Now, don’t rile me no more, but set off at once, and be back like winky, and if you do, I’ll give you a drop of the liquor, maybe.”

“No, thank ye, ma’am. I can’t abide it,” said Mary.

“The more fool you; aint you going to budge, eh?”

“Musn’t I get my bonnet ma’am?” said Mary.

“Bonnet, no! be off at once, or I’ll bonnet ye!” and she came like a fury towards Our Mary to slap her face.

“I know daddy ’ll be angry with me for going out into the street alone, across the Broadway, too,” said little Mary, as, seizing the shilling and the bottle, and ducking her pretty head to avoid Mrs. Toddles’ long bony hand, she rushed into the street.

The nearest public-house was the “Palmerston,” lower down on the other side, across

the Broadway. It was the same gin-palace where Charles Linden had first seen Our Mary weeping on the door-step, but she knew not that. On she ran, crossed the Broadway, and in she went, pale, scared, panting, terrified by the hideous, bloated faces, the angry voices, bad words, and loud curses which met her as she stole timidly to the counter and asked of a red-faced, corpulent, ruddy landlord, in a white apron, and a smiling landlady, all bugles, flowers, crinoline, and flounces, for tenpennyworth of gin.

A vile-looking man and a low, hideous woman were at the time boozing in the "Palmerston."

"Meg," said the man, "look there; aint we in luck this time and no mistake? I'm blowd if that ere aint the kid. She's agrowed no end, but I'll lay my life it's she. That's gold-haired Moll, and we may yet pocket the shiners, old gal."

"Hush!" said the woman. "Hold yer

jaw, can't ye? 'Tis she. Have you got the sack for the taters, and the gag about ye, eh?"

"Yes, Meg," whispered the man. "I always has the gag by me, 'cos why, there's no knowing what may turn up."

"Then come along. Follow I," said Meg.

Having paid for the gin, Our Mary looked about her in the Broadway for a shop where she might buy the clothes-line. A few doors up a back street (Dark Street West) she saw a shop with tools, brushes, coils of rope and line.

She turned the corner, though the street was very dark and quite deserted, in order to purchase the clothes-line. As she hurried along, suddenly a practised hand from behind slipped a gag into her little mouth, and a coarse sack, with an earthy smell, was drawn over her head and shoulders. The bottle, which she still clutched, was wrenched from one little hand, the twopence from the other. A strong pair of arms lifted and carried her

along. She could neither shriek nor struggle, but even in the horror of that moment she could think. She knew that her worst fears were confirmed, and that she was again in the power of Moonlight Meg and of Jawing Jem.

CHAPTER XXVI.

On the grass at thy feet
Crept maidens sweet,
To gather the dew of May.

OLD SONG.

It was a glorious day as Mina walked across the park and through the plantations, intending to go and watch the sea from a favourite rock not far from Woodhurstville. The trees all wore the bright green livery of the Lady Spring. The air was fragrant with the nutty scent of the white and pink may and of the shy violets, betrayed by their fragrance like modest virtue by its good deeds. All nature teemed with life. All young, glad

things were abroad. White lambs frolicked by their fleecy mothers ; matronly mares chaperoned their slender, prancing, long-legged colts ; motherly cows were flanked by their sweet young calves. The butterflies were abroad, gay dandies of the insect world as they are, sporting from one wild flower to another ; and so was that brown, steady, mercantile fellow, the bee, quite as great a flirt in his way, and both of them but cupboard-lovers after all, wooing the flowers for what they can get.

It was a day on which Sorrow's self might raise her drooping head, and own that there is much of beauty in this troublous world, while to happy hearts existence itself is luxury on such a day.

Soon Mina found her heart grow lighter as she felt the soft breeze play on her cheek and as she inhaled the rich fragrance of the wild flowers and the may. She began to listen to the voice of Hope, and to believe that

little Mary would be restored to her. She sat herself down on the rock she loved so well, and though her eyes filled with tears as she gazed on the sea lying blue and rippled before her, and thought of the dear one it had in its wrath engulfed, yet she did not sorrow as one without hope, for she remembered how good and true he was, and what she had often heard him say—

“Whom the gods love, die young.”

She was recalling words of his which seemed to be prophetic of his early doom, when a sigh stole upon her ear, and starting she looked timidly round, and saw Gaspar standing, very pale and with his arms folded, by her side.

“How quietly you stole upon me, Gaspar,” said Mina, smiling. “I did not hear your approach. Come and sit down by me, and tell me when you arrived, and how you left poor Aunt Mountjoy. How long have you been back here?”

"I am only just arrived, Mina," he said. "My mother is better, and I could not stay away any longer from Woodhurst."

As he spoke he fixed his eyes upon her face with an earnestness that made her tremble and turn alternately pale and red. She tried to laugh off her confusion, and said—

"Well, I was just longing to see you. I want to consult you. I want your help, Gaspar."

"Mina knows my life is at her service," said Gaspar. "But tell me, have you not some secret which lies heavy on your heart? If so, confide it to me; you will be happier then, Mina. Tell me what caused your illness? Be open with me, Mina. Remember I would die to serve you;" so saying, he took her trembling hand, and Mina, she scarce knew how or why, revealed to him the whole story of her visit to the Haunted Wing, and of the piece of parchment she had found on the music-desk of the organ. She frankly

described all that had appeared to her, and when she came to the last scene of the dissolving views of that phantasmagoria in which little Mary, restored to her by him, joined her hands, he suddenly threw his arms wildly round her waist, and said—

“Mina! my love! my life! can it be? I, too, have had revelations to a similar effect from the unseen world. Oh, Mina! sweet, dear cousin! who can tell? The Ghost of the Blue Chamber may be our guardian spirit. Let it be as he dictates—let me do all mortal man can do to save and restore to you the child you love so well, and whose uncertain fate so distresses your heart; and then let me claim you as my own! my love! my bride! my wife! True, I am a poor, deformed, distorted wretch, but you have beauty of shape and face for both of us, Mina; and I was not born so, Mina. It was a cruel—but I will not touch on that. I have loved you, you alone, from my boyhood, Mina!”

“Nay,” said Mina. “Ladybird was your first love, Gaspar. She knows how much you loved her, and so do I.”

“Mina, I never loved her, never had eyes or thoughts for any other than you. In your bewildering presence, I pretended to admire Ladybird because I knew if I were seen to raise my eyes to you, Mina, your father’s pride would take the alarm, and my own made me shrink from the possibility of being suspected of loving, not the white rose of Woodhurst, but the heiress of Woodhurst; and, therefore, I dissembled, and I pretended to admire that fair, frivolous, and doll-like beauty, with her light heart, light eyes, and light ringlets, while my very soul was darkened by one image—thine, my pale Madonna, my dark-eyed, deep-hearted, high-souled Mina! But this secret I kept even from you, hidden idol of my heart, until one fatal day. You remember it. We were riding together, and your horse ran away with you, and you were thrown, and I feared

much hurt, and in the agony of my terror I forgot my enforced reserve, and poured out all the impassioned misery of my heart into your cold and unwilling ear, cold and unwilling then, for then your heart was another's. You told me so with tears of pity in those dark, haunting eyes; and you forbade me ever to resume a subject any allusion to which you deemed treason to him. I obeyed you, Mina; but, oh, the anguish, the despair, the jealousy, that were the undying worms in my heart's core! Still I obeyed you, and though the struggle all but cost me my life, I never spoke to you again of this my first, my last, my only love! But now! now, oh, Mina! now that Heaven seems to have taken pity on a love so great, so entire as mine—now that you are free—now that “the fell Serjeant Death” has enlisted in his dark ranks him you loved so well—him to whom I owe this distorted, crippled form, and all that it has entailed on me hitherto, an unloved, joyless, sunless life—

now, too, that the spirits of an unseen world seem to suggest, nay, to urge our union—now, oh Mina ! I kneel to you once more; and I implore you, at least, to let me try to win, if not such love as you inspire, at least such esteem, confidence, and affection as may justify you to yourself in accepting me as your husband.”

He had sunk on his knees before Mina, and though in this attitude, as he bent forward and laid his throbbing brow on her knee, his hump rose in all its deformity above his head, yet Mina saw nothing but the anguish that heaved so convulsively the breast of the cripple and the hot tears that gushed from his eyes. She, too, trembled. She, too, was weeping, but yet she was firm.

“No, Gaspar,” she said, “I will not, dare not deceive you ; I never can be your wife. Your friend, your adopted sister, I am ; and if you restore to me that little girl in whom I had centred so much affection and so many

hopes, and whose uncertain fate causes me such deep distress, gratitude will be added to my feelings for you, Gaspar ; and, probably, the warmest, strongest affection I shall ever feel for any man will be that which will bind me to you. I do not interpret as you do the phantasmagoric prophecies of the Blue Chamber, Gaspar. There is something within me that so revolts from the thought of you as a lover, and yet so clings to you as a friend, that I believe it is *as friends* that the angel little one I have so long watched and wept for, united our hands ; and now rise, Gaspar, dismiss from your heart and mind a love I can never return, and accept the deep and true friendship I offer you instead."

"And this decision is irrevocable, Mina?" said Gaspar, in a hollow voice, slowly rising, pale as death, his eyes full of tears, and an expression of deadly passion on his face.

"It is," said Mina, solemnly.

A silence ensued. Suddenly Gaspar broke it by exclaiming—

"Mina, I am your slave. Do with me what you will. Give me all the affection you can, and send me forth on this mission."

"Kind, generous, devoted Gaspar," said Mina. "From what I saw in the Blue Chamber I believe our Mary is in London, lost, destitute, houseless. Go and seek her out, dear Gaspar. Lose no time. She seemed to me to be starving on that cold door-step. You will know far better than I can tell you how and where to seek her. Oh, lose no time, dear cousin, and write to me as soon and as often as you can, telling me every step you have taken, and what hopes you have."

"I will depart at once, Mina," said Gaspar; "and what can be done shall be done. Farewell,—one kiss, a sister's kiss," he said. "You used to kiss the poor hunchback at parting, Mina."

Mina bent her lovely face down to him—his lips touched her cheek.

To her that kiss was nothing. To him

what delicious ecstacy was in this brief contact with that satiny cheek, to which came a hue like that of the blush-rose, to meet his burning lips ; that touch sent a thrill to his passionate heart that almost made it cease to beat.

“ Are you ill, cousin ? ” asked Mina, kindly, seeing the deadly pallor of his face, and marking that he trembled violently.

“ No, no,” he said, “ not ill ; a little overcome, but not ill. I will see you safe into the park, Mina, and then I will set off for London.”

Silently he walked by her side until they were within the park gates, and then he hurried back to his villa at Woodhurstville ; but before he reached it he turned aside and plunged into the darkest depths of the wood.

There coming suddenly upon that little grassy amphitheatre where the earl had knelt to Mina when he had proposed to her, Gaspar gave himself up to all the long pent-up passionate emotions of his heart.

He threw himself on the grass, he beat his breast, he tore his hair. Curses, not loud, but deep, burst from the parched lips, from which the blood started as he bit them in his frantic anguish.

“Fool, dolt, accursed idiot!” he said to himself. “Fooled by a mere girl; and after all that I have suffered, all that I have done and dared, planned and executed, yes, all these years of plotting, planning, watching, biding my time, in bearing all I have borne of mental torture and bodily agony, and all in vain! and she thinks that I am to be quieted with the mawkish offer of her cold friendship, her sickly esteem! No; her love would have made me her slave; her scorn shall make me her master. She shall yet be mine, if it be true that there is an irresistible power in the human will. If it be true that woman always yields her silly prejudices to a persevering, resolute consistency and continuity of purpose, *she shall yet be mine!* But at this

moment, stronger than even the passionate love I bear her, and which is ever kindled by her dark eyes, so full of light, stronger even than that love is a feeling of intense and burning revenge for all she has made me suffer. *Revenge is my master-passion now ; and even when she is mine, my object will still be REVENGE !*"

END OF VOL. I.

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VOL. I.

X

